MERCURY MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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The HINGES of HELL

murder and arson, scorching pace... by

STEWART STERLING

also stories by

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MERCURY MYSTERY MAGAZINE

February, 1959

THE HINGES OF HELL *Stewart Sterling* 5

The hotel fire looked like a planned torching to Pedley, with the lovely corpse in 822 and the theft of a fortune in jewels adding to the unwholesome situation. Plunging into a hectic investigation, the fire marshal finds himself untangling a deadly snarl of arson and murder...

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The heartbeats exploded inside Grafton's chest as he remembered the voluptuous blond and that evening...

(Cover illustrating THE HINGES OF HELL)

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JOSEPH W. FERMAN, *Editor and Publisher*
EDWARD FERMAN, *Editorial Assistant* ROBERT P. MILLS, *Managing Editor*

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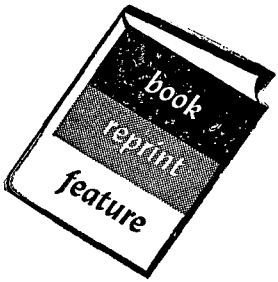

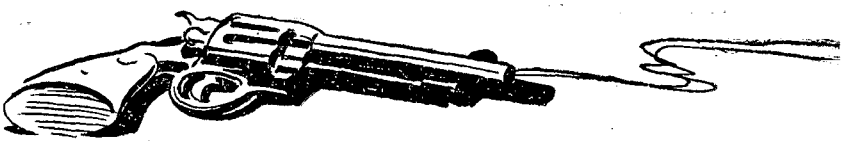

Stewart Sterling has fashioned a skillfully integrated story of fire investigation and murder with THE HINGES OF HELL. A hotel fire uncovers the body of a honeymooning heiress and the theft of a quarter of a million dollars in jewelry. Here is a lively, suspenseful mystery with a fresh slant, as Ben Pedley of New York's Bureau of Fire Investigation goes after a vicious firebug and murderer . . .

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THE HINGES OF HELL

by STEWART STERLING

CHAPTER ONE

THE BUCKEYE WHISTLE slashed the early-morning quietness with a shriek that drove a solitary cruising hackman to the curb in a flurry of slush. The Mars light wove its lurid figure eight from side to side like the bloodshot eye of a berserk Cyclops. The red sedan rocketed up the avenue at a speed forbidden by the *Manual for Apparatus Drivers*. Chief Fire Marshal Ben Pedley had a feeling in his bones there was work for him to do.

He wasn't happy about it. It was twenty minutes past three on a freezing February morning. The northwester coming in off the

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North River needled the marrow in his bones with a five-below bitterness. The Marshal had been in his warm bed at the Metropole less than an hour since returning from a two-bagger, caused by a short circuit, at Far Rockaway. Moreover, he hated fires, all fires, whatever time of day or night, wherever occurring.

Had been a time, back when he'd been a probationer at Truck Nine, practicing jumping into the life net, learning to use a ceiling hook to open up a draft, or crawling across a ladder bridging an alley ten floors up, battling along a smoke-choked corridor to smash down a door and make a rescue, or sitting around in the firehouse afterward shooting the breeze about it, when every fire had been a real kick, a chance to show his stuff. Not any more.

All that had changed after he'd transferred to the B.F.I. eight years ago. Only thing better than being a member of a truck company in the N.Y.F.D., he'd been sure, was to do detective work for the Bureau of Fire Investigation. Hadn't taken long for him to find out how wrong he'd been.

From being a challenge to guts and strength and training, fires had suddenly become ordeals involving charcoaled bodies pinned beneath smoldering wreckage, whimpering pyromaniacs, terrified old women peering beneath the sheets on morgue slabs, greedy and subsequently tearful policyholders, children on hospital cots screaming as burns were dressed, cunningly vicious firebugs. Even the promotion from deputy to chief fire marshal had given him no thrill; these days his only real satisfaction came from putting some arsonist behind bars.

Probably this blaze he was racing to now wouldn't even provide that somewhat morbid compensation, he thought, slewing around a stalled bus at Columbus Circle. The croaking voice from the short-wave speaker there on the dash had said that the night clerk at Hotel Wrenton Towers phoned in a still alarm at 3:05 A.M.; the battalion chief had sent in a second from Box 872 at 3:11, a third at 3:15. In Pedley's experience hotel fires, late at night, were more often the result of someone falling asleep smoking a cigarette than of a planned torching. Still, there was always the possibility of the discharged and disgruntled employee trying to take revenge on a hotelful of sleeping people, of the intoxicated and depressed guest deciding to end it all regardless of how many others he took with him into eternity. It would at least be necessary to take a look.

An ambulance clanged around into Broadway from Seventy-

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second. A patrol coupé zoomed across from the drive. The intersection cop semaphored the Marshal to cut through the red light. Up ahead the stream from a water tower was pointing a silver finger at the hotel in the emergency floodlights. Ice on the mall between the traffic lanes was splashed with claret from the red lights of three pumpers, two hook and ladders, a couple of hose trucks, and the battalion chief's car.

Hook Twenty had its eighty-five-foot aerial angled up from Seventy-fifth Street to the northern face of the hotel. Smoke, cauliflowering out of the windows on the eighth floor just above the peak of the giant ladder, was shrouding its tip. As Pedley bounced his sedan over tangled hose lines, slid across greasy ice against the rear bumper of Hose Thirty-two, a gust lifted the veil.

Two firemen were on the aerial. One stood on the second rung from the top, lifting a scaling ladder to hook it onto the ledge of the middle window on the eighth floor. The other braced him from behind. Ten feet above, a man's arm emerged from the swirling smoke like that of a drowning man going down in a whirlpool.

The Marshal picked his way over lumps of frozen coupling spray, across a treacherously slippery sidewalk to the main entrance, where four canvas boa constrictors writhed into the lobby. A bulky man in a black rubber coat and a white helmet festooned with icicles stood bellowing to a motor-pump operator.

"Stinker, Jack?"

Battalion Chief Jack Mackinnon slapped his forearms across his coat front like a seal. "Hi, Ben. Goddamn thing started in one of the air shafts; it's all through the eighth and ninth. Worst of it's that block of four-story brownstones just east. Roofs were going before we could get lines up there."

"Many still inside?" Pedley gestured toward the procession of half-clad men and women trudging out from the lobby in bathrobes over pajamas, fur coats over nightgowns, blankets over trouser legs.

"Not many. Elevators are running. Goddamn standpipe froze; we had to thaw out before we could get water on the ninth. Some of the people on that north wing were cut off on the eighth and ninth. We've got the Pirsch up to the seventh; we'll get 'em." The Battalion Chief bellowed instructions to the water-tower operator.

Pedley went back to the corner where another fireman was

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mounting the giant Pirsch ladder. The top man had his safety belt hooked around the scaling ladder, was climbing up to the window ledge of the eighth floor like a monkey on a stick.

The wind had shifted. Wisps of smoke blurred the Marshal's view temporarily, but that blossoming cauliflower of creamy yellow smoke was now trailing off eastward into the floodlit night. The waving arm at the window had shoulders and a head attached to it now. The fireman on the scaling ladder reached up, caught hold of the ledge beside the trapped victim.

A hoarse cheer went up from the crowd, invisible to Pedley behind the fierce glare of the floodlights; it merged almost instantaneously into a deep, rumbling groan as rescuer and rescued began to struggle on that narrow ledge a hundred feet above the sidewalk.

The fireman seemed to be trying to get the man—a youth in topcoat and muffler, his face streaked with smoke or soot—to descend the scaling ladder; the other was apparently afraid to try it. Suddenly the trapped man ducked back into the window. A glint of bright orange showed on the pane just above where his head had been.

The fireman on the ledge crawled inside, reappeared after a dozen seconds with the other over his shoulder, began to rope the unconscious man beneath the armpits. He lowered the limp body to the second man at the top of the ladder. The victim was passed down to the third fireman, who half carried, half slid him toward the aerial's turntable. As the fireman who made the rescue began the ticklish descent from ledge to aerial on the scaling ladder, there was a soft *punnh* like a partly inflated paper bag being exploded high above the street. A tongue of flame *whooshed* out of the eighth-floor windows, tasted at the ledge.

The cheers began again. Bright flares sparked the incandescence of the floodlights—flash bulbs somewhere inside the police lines. Pedley edged past hosemen trying to free lines frozen to the pavement, reached the turntable of the great fly ladder. The roped victim was being lowered to the street.

One of the truck-company men growled, "Better put him in the amby; looka that mark on his puss!"

Pedley scowled. "Hold it, boys." He bent over the victim, used his handkerchief, wiped the smoke smudge off the young man's face. It was, or had been, a darkly handsome face with a long,

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thin nose, high cheekbones, a fine forehead, and deeply shadowed eye sockets. "Get that ambulance interne here, fast."

The fireman who held the youth's legs protested: "Jeeze, Marshal, we oughta rush this guy straight to the hospital. He looks like he's had it!"

Pedley was bleak. "Put him down. Bring the doc! Jump! I know this lad. He's Raff Estero. I sent him up, year ago, for burning down a grade school in Harlem. Maybe he has had it. If he has, I want him to talk before he checks out."

And if he hasn't, the Marshal added silently, maybe I'll have to see he gets it.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOCTOR straightened, letting the stethoscope dangle from his ears. "Don't understand it. Little wheeze in his chest. Not enough to indicate smoke poisoning."

Pedley knelt by the unconscious Estero's right hand. Skin had been torn from the raw middle knuckle; the fingers were bloody.

"I hadda knock him out, Marshal." The fireman who had climbed the scaling ladder shoved his helmet back on his forehead, the brim lumpy with ice from spray of the water tower. "He wrestled me around on that ledge like he wanted to give me the big heave down to the sidewalk. I hadda bop him."

The doctor unhooked the stethoscope, thrust the ear pieces behind the collar of his starchy jacket. "He'll be all right then, soon's he snaps out of it."

Pedley peered more closely at the smeared fingers. "Was he panicked at the idea of the climb down?"

"Nah." The rescuer coughed up a trickle of smoke which hung in the chill air like a frosty exhalation. "He yelled he wouldn't come down until I went inside for his girl. Said she was in the room right next to the window. But crysake! Those flames were lashing at his tail right then. Wouldn't been a Chinaman's chance, going in there. Say nothing of finding a dame and dragging her out. But he grabbed me, tried to haul me inside anyway. So I socked him. Musta blown his stack, on account of this babe."

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The fireman lifted the unconscious man's shoulders, backed over a spaghetti-like tangle of hose to the ambulance.

Pedley glanced at the 20 on the front plate of the fireman's helmet. "You're in Cap Lane's company?"

"Right. Haddaway, Les Haddaway, Marshal." He deposited the youth's shoulders in the big department ambulance.

Pedley slid Estero's legs in. "That was a nice snug job of life-belt work."

The trucksie coughed up more smoke. "Touch and go there for a couple minutes; wasn't sure I'd socked him hard enough. Thought he might come to, start to maul me around while we were coming down that scaling ladder. Kind of lucky."

"Lucky for him, yair. He'd have been barbecued by now if you hadn't brought him down." Pedley went back to his sedan, shucked his topcoat, splashed toward the hotel entrance.

He stalked into the lobby, past rubber-clad men lugging rolls of hose, others leading dazed and half-clad guests from the elevators. A hotel employee in uniform and a middle-aged stout woman huddled beside the telephone switchboard behind the registration desk.

"No answer," the woman cried in a shrill, frightened voice. "It's no use. . . . I can't get any answer, Sam."

"Keep ringing." The man wore the lavender-gray monkey jacket of a bellman; he had the bright, dark eyes and small, foxy features of a precocious child; his voice was low and soothing. "Maybe they got a skinful, they're dead to the world. I seen stew bums sleep right through a earthquake. Keep ringin'. . . ."

There were two elevators. One car was at the lobby level, empty, its guard door open. The indicator on the other said it was up on seventeen. Pedley called, "Hey! Bellhop! Run me up!"

The bellman turned. "Ain't allowed upstairs, mister."

"I'm allowed." Pedley stepped into the car.

"Nobody up. Strict orders from th' Fire Department."

A soot-streaked fireman carrying a hand extinguisher across the lobby growled irritably, "Get the lead out, bud. He's the Chief Fire Marshal."

The bellman's mouth made a silent O. "Sorry, Marshal." He scuttled to the car, levered it into motion before the guard door was closed. "What floor?"

"Eighth."

"They're still shootin' water on that floor. One of those streams

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could burst every bone in your body, happened to slam you up against a wall."

"Try not to let that happen. What room were you trying to wake up with the phone bell?"

"Eight-twenny-two." The bellman seemed surprised. "Switchboard's been ringing 'em practically every minute since the fire was discovered. 'Course, maybe they beat it down the stairs an' nobody happened to see 'em."

"Which side is eight-twenty-two?"

"North." The bellman brought the car to a stop at the eighth-floor level. "That's where the fire started. In that air shaft next to eight-twenny-two."

"Who's in there?"

"Young couple *was* in there. You want I should wait?"

"Yair. You wait. What's the couple's name?"

"Starr. Not that names mean much on a registration card, see what I mean?" The car stopped.

The door to 822 was open, but the lock had been broken with a Halligan; the marks showed on the jamb.

He swung the beam of his flashlight around the room. Twin beds, one with crumpled sheets and blankets, the other still made up. One suitcase, a new tan cowhide, open on the rack at the foot of the unused bed. A tray with a bottle of Old Botts whisky and six splits of club soda, a pail for ice cubes. On the bureau, a gold brush and comb set, a gold hand mirror, a girl's handbag, compact, lipstick. Girl's clothing over the back of a boudoir chair. No men's things at all.

The room hadn't been touched by the fire, though the acrid smell of burned carpeting and scorched wood was strong. Not even the draperies, which flapped against the Venetian blinds, rattling them with a sound like that of a skeleton's bones clattering in the wind, had been charred.

If there had been a girl in here, the firemen who had broken into the room must have taken her down. . . . That seemed plain from a quick glance in bathroom and closet. Both empty.

His flashlight glinted against a piece of glass on the carpet between the twin beds. He went closer to see if a highball glass had been broken.

What had looked like a piece of glass was an earring, a dangling, dark-blue jewel big as a robin's egg set in a silvery metal. It couldn't be the real thing, he decided; a sapphire of that size would be worth five years of his salary. He bent down to pick it

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up. Something bright red showed against stark white in the circle of his flash.

Enameled toenails on a bare foot beneath one of the beds. A foot so small and dainty that it might have been one of those casts made from a dead person.

She was wearing the top half of black satin pajamas, and she hadn't been dead long. Her skin was warm to his touch.

CHAPTER THREE

THROUGH THE GLASSLESS window the throb of the pumpers, the clanging of ambulance gongs, the hoarse roar of flames down the block were puncutated by the clatter of the slats in the Venetian blinds. Feathers of sooty ash brushed the Marshal's face as he shoved aside the bed that had concealed the girl's body.

She lay on her stomach with her arms outflung and one knee drawn up in a crawling position as if she had been trying to find safety beneath the box spring. The right side of her face was pressed to the dark green carpet. A short, tawny mane, golden streaked with lighter patches, almost platinum, was darkened over her right temple. He lifted her head.

The blond hair was matted with blood above her right eye. A blue-black bruise, about the size of his thumbnail, extended from the eyebrow almost to the hairline.

Not our old friend, the unknown blunt instrument, anyhow, he said to himself. The corner of a dressing table, or even the sharp edge of a door, might have caused that.

He examined her ears. Neither lobe had been pierced for earrings.

Nice-looking kid. Beautiful, maybe. Hard to tell, in death. Features relax. Sometimes makes 'em look worse, sometimes better. Nineteen, no more than twenty, anyhow. No wonder young Estero was steamed up about rescuing her. If he had been.

Pedley yanked a blanket off the unused bed, wrapped it around her, covering the head, the bare legs and feet. The earring went into his pocket.

Out in the corridor he called to the elevator man:

"Tell one of those firemen the Marshal wants a stretcher up here with a couple to carry it."

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"Jeeze! You find 'em in there?" Sam looked startled. "Alive?"

"One I found isn't alive."

"You want I should tell the cops? You can't move a body without the cops' permission." The elevator man was agitated.

"Just the firemen. Snap it up." Pedley went back into 822, heard the elevator door close.

Had all those people down on the street been driven from their beds by an incendiarist who thought he could cover up a murder by burning out the hotel? The ambulance cases, the terrified children, the now homeless old women—were they the victims of a torch? The answer seemed depressingly obvious.

He went through the bureau. Not much there. Some nylons, a girl's slip, a pair of men's shorts.

The handbag was more informative. Alligator cigarette case, initialed L.R. in gold. Combination billfold and pocket checkbook, checks on Bank of the Manhattan Company, no balance figures. Keys, credit coins on Bonwit's, Lord & Taylor, Saks Fifth Avenue. Girl had money, evidently. Or lots of credit. . . .

There were no letters or bills. No money at all; no coin purse. And no duplicate of the sapphire earring.

He used his flashlight on the closet. The fire had reached in there; the rear of the closet had burned through so he could see into a small air shaft, perhaps five feet by three. The inside of the closet was completely charcoaled. Wilted metal hangers still hung on the charred rod, but whatever clothing had been there was now reduced to the pile of drenched ashes on the closet floor.

On his knees, he combed painstakingly through the black soup of burned fabric and carbonized buttons on the closet floor. Whatever else might eventually be dredged up from that ashy mess, he was sure the other earring wasn't there.

The bathroom backed up against the closet; the air shaft extended along behind both. Heat had forced porcelain tiling loose, buckled piping, splinted the door mirror. Great streaks of brownish soot swept up from the small air shaft window above the toilet to the ceiling. The floor was littered with glass from the shattered window and the mirror.

He stood on the seat, used his flash on the air shaft. Most of the space was occupied by a galvanized duct for the air-conditioning system. Six feet below the level of the air-shaft window, there was an elbow of the duct that made a shelf completely blocking the shaft. The flat top of the elbow was warped and

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blackened. Above and around it the white plaster of the shaft had cracked loose, was smeared with those same brown, sooty stains. But below, the beam of the flashlight showed white, unbroken plaster. This was where the fire had started.

The elevator door banged open; he could hear Sam giving directions to 822.

Pedley got down from his pedestal, went out to the bedroom.

The two firemen were both from 32 Truck.

One said, "We was up here before, Marshal. I broke the lock here, myself. Charley come in with me. We couldn't find anyone here."

Charley said, "Matt's got it right. We looked in the john and the closet. There wasn't—" He stopped, gawking at the blanketed figure on the floor.

Pedley said, "She was under the bed. Don't blame you for not finding her."

Matt crossed himself. "Now I sure do feel bad about that!"

"Don't take it to heart," Pedley said. "Chances are she was dead when you broke in here." He helped lift her onto the canvas stretcher. "Tell the ambulance crew I want her ticketed straight to Doc Cecil at the morgue."

Charley stooped to get a hold on the stretcher handles. "This one of those things, Marshal?"

"Just going through the routine." Pedley followed them out to the elevator. "Did the rest of the block get away from the boys?"

"Took three of those rooming houses," Matt said. "But they've got everything under control now. You don't think we could've saved this dame?"

"No, I don't." Pedley edged into the car beside the tilted-up stretcher.

Sam eyed the blanketed figure. "Jeeze, no wonder she didn't answer the phone."

At the lobby, after the stretcher men had gone out to the street, Pedley said, "Where's your night manager?"

"Right there." Sam pointed to an upholstered club chair beside the magazine rack. Leaning forward in the chair, with his forearms on his knees and gazing vacantly at a piece of ice melting on the carpet, sat a short, stout man with a round, pink-glass face and a nearly bald head. "Name is Higgins."

Pedley touched the manager on the shoulder. "See your registration records, Mister Higgins?"

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The plump man stood up. "By God, I suppose the police'll be on our necks twenty-four hours a day, here in."

"I'm not from headquarters," Pedley explained. "From the Bureau of Fire Investigation. Want to see your registration for the Starrs in eight-twenty-two."

"Show you everything we have." The manager moved like a fat duck. From the registration rack behind the partition at the rear of the mail desk, he produced a card.

Mr. and Mrs. R. E. Starr
2114 Calitisu Drive
El Paso, Texas

"Came in last night around seven thirty. Said they might stay a couple days. Nice young couple. Respectable. Well dressed. Gave 'em a double with twins, eight bucks. That's all I know about 'em."

Starr. Estero means star in Spanish, doesn't it? El Paso. Raff came from out that way. "Didn't hear any complaints about trouble up there in eight-twenty-two, did you?"

"None whatever. You think there was trouble?"

"Yair." Pedley nodded curtly. "Happen to know when Mister Starr went out tonight?"

Higgins spread his palms, helplessly. "We can't keep a check on the movements of five or six hundred guests."

"No. Of course not. Still . . . might ask around. Somebody might have noticed. Bellboys, elevator men. Ask 'em, will you?"

"Be glad to. But—"

Sam came in from the street, where he'd been watching the progress of the stretcher bearers. "Hey! Know who that babe was?"

"Who?" Higgins asked.

"Blanket came off her face while they were loading her in the ambulance." Sam was excited. "One of the news photographers was there waiting to get a shot at her. When he saw her, he was so surprised he forgot to shoot the bulb. He says she's that glamour puss they had the story on in *Life*, few weeks ago. Vinia Rengist."

"Jesus Christ!" It didn't sound profane, as Higgins said it.

"Supposed," Sam went on, "to be worth a couple zillion. Ain't that a juicy scandal for the colyumnists. This dough-heavy dame who gets her picture in the papers pretty near every day, shackin' up here in the ole Wrenton with some joy

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boy! An' gettin' herself bonfired! What you know about that?"

Pedley juggled the earring in his pocket thoughtfully.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEYOND THE CIGAR COUNTER was a cubicle with two phone booths. The Marshal dug out a dime, put it in a slot.

A sleepy voice answered, resignedly, "Shaner speaking."

"Fan your tail over to the Wrenton Towers, Broadway and Seventy-fifth."

His most dependable deputy groaned. "Why do all the bad ones have to hit in an hour after I've sacked off!"

"Think I'm enjoying it? We have work to do, Ed."

"Just as I was embarking on a lovely dream of dalliance. Hoom."

"Be plenty of time to dally over here. Find me in eight-twenty-two." He hung up, beckoned to Sam. "Who's on the other elevator?"

"Pete. Pete Sazlo. Night porter." The bellman was eager to be helpful. "He's supposed to clean up around the lobby but after Mac—he's our three-to-midnight car jockey—goes home, Pete helps me out if we get too many buzzes for service." He glanced up at the indicator. "He's comin' down now."

Pedley nodded. "You remember what time you took the Starrs up?"

"I roomed 'em. Half past seven, maybe quarter to eight. Took up a bar tray, say half past eight. Didn't set eyes on 'em after that. Maybe Pete did; if they came down I mustn't have been around the lobby. Why, you figure there was some monkey biz?" Sam could scarcely contain his curiosity.

Pedley ignored the question. "Ask Mister Higgins to let me have the registrations for guests in all the twenty-two rooms above the eighth, will you?" Pete's car was coming down from the third.

Sam wanted to stall. "Guests in nine-twenty-two, ten-twenty-two, and like so?"

"Yair. And the ones in eight-twenty-four. Next the Starrs."

Sam departed reluctantly. The door of Pete's car opened. A tall man in a black cashmere ulster with collar pulled up, the

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brim of his black velour pulled down to hide his eyes, stepped out briskly. He was in his sixties; he had the florid, jowly features and white walrus mustache of a Peter Arno cartoon; Pedley put him down as a politician.

The man marched smartly to the street door, turned quickly to look back at the Marshal.

"Who's he?" Pedley asked the chunky-chested operator.

"Gentleman from the twelfth, don't know his name." Pete Sazlo wrinkled his forehead. "You a police officer?"

"I'm the Fire Marshal, Pete. You remember taking either of the couple in eight-twenty-two down tonight?"

"I don't room none of these people, mister. I wouldn't have no idea who's in what room."

"Young fellow with a dark complexion, a Mexican. Good-looking. A dresser. Remember him?"

"I might of taken him down. I couldn't be sure. We get two or three hundred new people a day; I don't come on duty till twelve; most of 'em I never see at all."

"Yair. Makes it tough. I'll bring around a photo, see if you recognize him."

Pete looked worried. "He the one with the dame who got burned?"

"One who died, yair. Run me back up to eight."

He was straddling the sill of the tiny air-shaft window ten minutes later when Shaner called from the bedroom:

"And what is the Firebug's Foe up to now?"

Pedley climbed down off his perch. "Trying to decide whether this was due to carelessness or cussedness, Ed. Blaze started from a butt or something tossed down into a mass of toilet tissues, soap wrappers, paper junk. Ordinary course of events, I'd report it accidental. Way things are, not so sure."

The deputy, a man with the plump, brick-red face of a butcher and the cold, wary eyes of a gambler, sized up the used and unused beds. "The Rengist babe's death wasn't an accident, either, was it?"

"What'd you hear about that?" The Marshal wasn't actually surprised; Ed Shaner had the news sense of a leg man on a tabloid.

"Boys said somebody'd slugged her. Ought to be good for about three days of page one. *HEIRESS MURDERED. PROMINENT DEB DIES IN HOTEL HIDEAWAY.* Who was the joe?"

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"Fellow who was rescued from the ledge out in the hall there by a couple of brothers from Twenty Truck. Remember Raff Estero?"

Shaner's shaggy eyebrows did nip-ups. "No kidding! That Harlem hot-shot?"

"They had to kayo him to get him down the scaling ladder. He's in the *D* ward. Going down to see what I can get out of him, now. You know what I want in here."

"Afraid I do, coach." Shaner stepped up on the seat to inspect the air shaft. "Say, you see what I see? That little charred cylinder?"

"Cardboard core from a roll of can paper, yair."

"Maybe some sucker heaved a whole roll down there, just to keep the home fires burning?"

"First time I ever heard of a torch using a tissue-paper fuse, if so." Pedley held the earring on his palm. "Get all the gook on that closet floor. I sifted through it to see if I could find the dupe to this, but no dice. This one was loose on the carpet beside the body."

Shaner whistled softly. "Don't pick up those pretties in the five and dime, do you? Robbery motive?"

"Do the guessing on your own time. What I want is that stuff for the lab test. And I don't want any clumsy Homicide experts mucking around in here until I say so."

"Tut and tut-tut, coach. Haven't you heard about the new era of friendly co-operation between our municipal departments?"

"Sure. They can co-operate by leaving this to us, time being. Keep in touch with Barney."

Hosemen were picking up frozen lines from the icy street when the Marshal sloshed to his sedan. He drove across Central Park and down the East River Drive until the immense honeycomb of the City Hospital loomed high overhead.

The policeman on guard at the Detention Ward said, "They put your prisoner down there in cot seventeen, Marshal. He come to a few minutes after they checked him in; started yelling like he belonged over in the Psych Ward. The orderlies had to put the sheets on him to keep him from runnin' wild."

Pedley moved along the aisle of cots; most of the prisoner-patients were sleeping or under the influence of narcotic injections. Raff Estero lay swathed in a heavy canvas sheet that was tied up under his chin and fixed by straps to the cot frame so he had very little freedom of movement. His eyes were closed;

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the black-brown *D* stood out starkly on his forehead, but there was nothing to indicate the man had been hurt by the fire.

Pedley thought of the last time he'd studied that sulkily handsome face, on the witness stand in Juvenile Court on the occasion of Estero's trial for arson. The sullen indifference was no longer there; the regular features seemed twisted and convulsed with inner pain. But the Marshal almost expected to hear the surly voice with its irritating "I—don't—know," "I don't remember," "I don't care" routine. Everything in court had been whiny excuses alternating with icy indifference. Nothing, not the witnesses' accusations, the prosecutor's attacks, or the judge's strictures before sentencing, had seemed to penetrate the tough-guy, wise-guy shell of the juvenile criminal. But by the contortions of the youth's mouth, something was touching him now.

"Hi, Raff. Remember me?"

The dark eyes opened quickly. "How is she? She all right?" Recognition was plain in Estero's expression, but there was none of the rancor Pedley had expected.

"The girl in your room? No, she isn't all right, Raff. They had to bring her here to the hospital." Well, to the morgue, right next door; it might be too much of a shock to put it to the kid that way.

"What happened? What's the matter with her? She wouldn't open the door when I got back to the room so I—"

"Left her alone, did you? Why'd you go out?"

"For sandwiches, goddamn it. They didn't have any room service after midnight, so I went down to a delicatessen and when I got back the corridor was all full of smoke and I couldn't get in our room. She'd locked the door and wouldn't let me in. I tried to bust it down but I couldn't . . . and then the fire engines came, and I couldn't get out of the hall except by the window. . . ." The words tumbled out in a frenzy. Estero struggled to sit up but the restraining sheet was too much for him. He lay panting with exhaustion. "Did they get her down in time?"

"They brought her down only a few minutes after you were rescued." Pedley side-stepped. "How'd the fire start, Raff? You have a quarrel with her and—"

"You son of a bitch! Why would I quarrel on my honeymoon?"

"Married, hah? When was this?"

"Yesterday. Yesterday morning. Up in Norwalk, Connecticut. What damn difference does it make!"

"Might make some, your marrying a million bucks, Raff."

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"I didn't marry her for her dough, no matter what you or anyone else says. Vinia knows it, that's all that's important to me."

"Might be important if you were to inherit your wife's dough, Raff."

"Inherit?" Tears filled the dark eyes. "She isn't . . ." He sobbed. "She isn't dead, is she?" He tried to roll over onto his face in a paroxysm of grief.

Pedley watched him a moment before he signaled to a white-jacketed orderly. "Take off these straps. I'll be responsible for this kid."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SMALL TUB-CLOSET off the Detention Ward corridor reeked with iodoform, ether, antiseptics; the heat from the steam radiator sent out a nauseating effluvium of its own. But there had been no other room available where Pedley could talk to the youth in private.

Huddled on the small metal chair, backed up against a pile of white enamel trays topped by bedpans, Raffael Estero was a picture of misery. "When they going to give me my clothes back, Mister Pedley?" He stared up with a fierce intensity at the long, homely, horse face with the burn scar beside the wide mouth, at the somber gray eyes set in the deep sockets. "You can't hold me without booking me."

"We are," the Marshal said evenly.

"You got to give me a chance to talk to a lawyer! I got a right to make bail, even if you do arrest me."

"You've forgotten, Raff. Marshal's office doesn't have to file charges. I'm holding you on suspicion. Wait—" He held up a palm to cut off the protest. "I didn't say you firebugged the Wrenton."

"You think I did, though . . . just on account of that conviction!" Raff was resentful. "You're gonna railroad me again because you sent me up once before!"

"The Bureau isn't in the railroading business." Pedley was patient.

"Then whyn't you make 'em give me back my clothes! I got to get out of here to fix things for Vinny's funeral." Estero's lips quivered. "You can't keep me here when my wife's goin' to be buried."

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"I'm sorry about your wife. Damn sorry. But a lot of other people got hurt up there on Seventy-fifth this morning, kid. While I was on my way down here, they sent out the five-five-five-five tap to all the firehouses. Meant one of the boys died in that blaze. Some of the people in the rooming houses behind the hotel got hurt, too. I'm responsible to their families, as well as to your wife's. I can't let you go. You ought to be glad I'm not going to. If I did, the cops would fling you in the clink on a homicide charge."

"Give a dog a bad name!" Estero turned his head to the barred window. Through its iron lattice the East River looked like a strip of hammered pewter in the cold light of the false dawn. "You'll never believe I didn't do it, because you know I did, once before. O.K., let me out until Vinia's funeral; I'll take the rap. Don't make any difference what happens to me now, anyhow."

"I went to bat for you with the parole board, kid. Told them I thought you might have learned your lesson. Now I'm not so sure. If you torched the hotel, I'll put you out of circulation, that I guarantee. If you didn't, I'll clear you. You want to get out of here in a hurry, best way to do it is tell me just what did happen up at the Wrenton."

The dark eyes filled with tears. "What the hell would happen! Vinny and I were spending the first night of our honeymoon!"

"Yair. Then how come you clouted her?"

Estero came up off the chair, his lips curling back over the small, white, even teeth; he reached for the topmost tray. "Nobody can get away with saying I hit my baby! Take it back!"

"Somebody hit her." Pedley didn't move or raise a hand. "Knocked her out. Before the fire started. Or right afterward."

The grip on the tray relaxed. "You're needling me!" Raff held the bandaged knuckle to his mouth. "To get me sore, make me say something I don't mean!"

"Why would I dream up a lie like that, kid? You can see for yourself, after the autopsy. Somebody socked her. Over the right eye. Hard enough to kill her, maybe. That'll be up to the med exam. Maybe the fire was set to cover up the attack on your bride. Who'd have any cause to harm her?"

Estero's face contorted to a grimace of pain. "I don't know! I don't know anybody who'd have hurt her. And how could anyone have gotten in our room?"

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"You leave the door unlocked?"

"No! She locked it inside when I went out." The voice was hoarse with recollection of the last time he'd seen the girl alive. "She'd never have opened it for anyone but me. Never!"

Estero dropped weakly back on the chair. "How you know she didn't fall and bump her head?"

"Wasn't anything around she could have hit to make a mark like the one over her eye. Who knew where you'd gone to spend the night?"

"Nobody."

"Who was at your wedding?"

"There wasn't any fancy wedding." Estero ran thin fingers through his hair, agitatedly. "We were married in the City Clerk's office. So Vinny's mother wouldn't get wise."

"Mrs. Rengist didn't want you for a son-in-law?"

"She hates my guts."

"No crime to have your mother-in-law dislike you. When'd you make reservations at the hotel?"

"Didn't. Drove up, went in, got a room. Vinny didn't think she'd be as likely to run into any of her café-society buddies in that part of town. All we wanted was to be left alone. I wish to Christ I'd never heard of the goddamn dump!"

"Ever been there before with her?"

"No." A tearful glare. "Nothing like that."

"Haven't any idea who might have wanted to bust up your marriage? Besides the girl's mother?"

"Sure I have an idea. The phony she was engaged to before I met her. J. Humphrey Tarkk, Junior." He wiped his face, unashamedly. "But that fathead hasn't brains enough to have found out where we were spending the night. Vinny wouldn't have let him in the room, anyhow. Besides, Hump Tarkk is a wrongo all the way. Vinny knew it; that's why she wouldn't have any part of him, even though her mother trapped her into getting engaged to him."

"You have any run-in with him, yourself?" Pedley recalled the name Tarkk in connection with some proxy battle that had been waged for control of a drugstore chain.

"Not directly. No." Estero hesitated a moment. "Vinny did. Couple weeks ago, one night when she'd broken a date with him to go out with me; he warned her that if she kept on seeing me, I'd wind up in a hospital." He picked up the blanket, redraped it around him. "And by Jesus, he was right!

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Here I am. I wish I was dead in place of Vinny." He began to cry, silently.

"She send back the ring this Tarkk gave her?"

"Sure. Right after he threatened her about me. Why?"

"Didn't have any rings on when I found her."

The low moaning of a tug on the river and the ticking of the alarm clock set over the water tubs were, for a long minute, the only sounds in the cubicle. Raff seemed stunned.

Why'd that jolted him? But it had. He's doing some thinking now. Doesn't seem to relish it much. Maybe Ed was right about robbery as a motive. No, you don't believe that, Ben. Something more'n grand larceny behind this.

"No ring at all?" Raff asked tensely.

"None."

"No wedding ring? I gave her a wedding ring." He had a haunted expression as if he was unable to believe his own ears. "She had it on when I left the room."

"Didn't see it on her finger."

Estero wiped his face with the tail of the nightshirt. "You look in the box?"

"The suitcase?"

"The jewel case. Steel. With a kind of copper inlay."

"Didn't find any. How big was it?"

"About this size." Estero demonstrated a ten-inch length, a six-inch height.

"Where'd your wife keep it?"

"In her suitcase," Estero muttered. "She had around a quarter of a million dollars' worth of diamonds and stuff in it."

CHAPTER SIX

BARNEY MALLOY, chief clerk of the Bureau of Fire Investigation, set the carton of coffee and the waxed-paper-wrapped sandwiches on the Marshal's desk blotter. "They were out of corn beef; I got ham and fried egg."

"All right." Pedley didn't swivel his chair around but remained with his back to the desk, peering down at the bridge traffic crawling in the mush brown snow across Chambers Street

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in front of the Municipal Building. "Doc Cecil's office called while you were down at the lunch counter. Girl died of smoke poisoning after all. Wound on her forehead might have been a contributing factor in her death; she might have been unconscious when those sulphide and cyanide fumes hit her and finished her."

"Ill wind, huh? Blows the case to the Bureau instead of to the Hommy experts, doesn't it?"

"Yair." Pedley swung around to his breakfast. "Think that's good?"

"Hell, boss. You know how those bulls would handle it. Team of 'em working on that kid in relays, they'd have a confession before noon. You don't think he's guilty, do you?"

The Marshal pried the cardboard cover off the carton, unwrapped one of the sandwiches before answering. "No. I don't. Maybe that's a sign I'm slipping, Barnus. If I'm getting to the point where I'm letting my sympathies affect my judgment, maybe I ought to put in for retirement." He sipped the coffee absently. "Here's this Estero kid with an arson conviction on his record. The fire was set right next to the room where he's staying. His bride gets killed in the blaze, and a snazzle of jewelry disappears at the same time. What you think a jury'd do with a set of circumstances like that?"

Barney held out his fist, thumbs down. "Maybe he wasn't leveling with you about that quarter-million figure?"

"What would he gain by a build-up? Larger the loot was, bigger the temptation for him to bop his bride, start a fire to cover the crime, sneak out of the hotel, and ditch the jewelry before coming back to play Hero-Fails-to-Rescue-Young-Wife. No, I wouldn't say he exaggerated the amount; that's one of the things that makes me doubt his guilt. It's probably what he'd been told the gems were worth. Likely they were insured for that sum; usually the policy valuation is too high."

"Do the Rengists rate that kind of gewgaws?"

"They did. When the old man was alive. He had the Midas touch." Pedley worked on the sandwich. "Everything he touched turned to profits, that's the impression I got from stories printed, time of his death."

Barney's snub nose wrinkled as if he smelled something bad. "Kid would have to have been specially dumb, to pull off a raw one like that the first day after he'd been married."

"Sure. But he didn't even bother to set up an alibi. And unless

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I'm a lousy judge of human nature, he's really all broken up by the girl's death." Pedley frowned at the row of snapshots arranged across the desk; they had come from Estero's wallet, which had been taken from the prisoner at Bellevue. There were seven photos of the girl he'd found under the bed. . . .

Lavinia Rengist posed against a Renault with a background of spruce trees. In skating costume on the rink at Rockefeller Center. On the porch of a beach cottage with a surfboard beside her. Sitting against a tiger-striped banquette at El Morocco. Another in abbreviated skating skirt taken at some larger rink. Kneeling with one arm around the neck of a cast-iron jockey of the type once used as hitching posts and now fancied as antiques. And one in a daring Bikini; part of that snapshot had been scissored away to cut some other figure out of the picture.

"Kind of a camera diary." Pedley was thoughtful. "Dates on the back. Cryptic abbreviations, likely references to special occasions. Sort of thing a youngster does when he's gal-goofy. No, I don't think he's putting on an act about the grief. Yet, if he didn't slug her . . . who did?" He tucked back into the wallet eighty-three dollars in tens and ones, a packet of business cards, mostly theatrical agents and night clubs. "Dig up everything you can on J. Humphrey Tarkk, Junior. Call George at the *Herald Trib* library. Check *Who's Who* for club affiliations. The works, Barnus."

"Can I use Ollie for some of the leg work? I've got that report on condemnations for the Commissioner's office, boss."

"Hell with the report. Bear down on Tarkk. But it might be a good idea to ring Ollie in on this, yair."

The phone rang. Barney took it.

"Hold your water, Ed. He's right here. Shaner, boss."

Pedley took the receiver. "How you coming?"

Shaner said, "Think you got a thing here, coach. There was enough carbonized can paper down on that air duct to bake spuds in. And four burned kitchen matches."

"What about the closet?"

"Nothing except ash soup. I'm shipping it all down to the lab. Just getting to work with the fingerprint kit. What I called you about, there's a gent here claiming the stuff on the bureau . . . the gold-backed mirror and brushes."

"Who is he?"

"Veddy impressive pahdy, suh. Card says he answers to tag of Mathing. A vice-prez of Brounham, Mathing, Sussfield and

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Rhine, Fourteen Wall Street, no less. Represents the Rengist family."

"How'd he learn about the girl's being at the Wrenton?"

"Allows as how reporters called Mrs. Rengist up at Scarsdale, couple hours ago. Likewise states he insists on personally identifying remains."

"I'll be right up, Ed. Tell him to wait."

"It shall be done. I've had a time with the hounds of the Hommy crew. Cap Stearns is getting some kind of court order to force us to turn over all evidence to him."

"Nuts to Stearns. Get that stuff down to the lab. I'm on my way."

In the lobby of the Municipal Building he bought three morning papers. The fire was splashed all over the front page.

A full-page cut showed Estero's unconscious figure being lowered from the turntable of the aerial ladder. It was captioned: *Glamour Gal of '54 Comes to End of Primrose Path.* There was no mention of Raff Estero or of Les Haddaway. Pedley sighed, inspected the muddy reproductions of the cameraman's art on pages 2 and 3.

One showed the pitiful procession of evicted guests marching out to the icy street in variegated nightwear. Another showed Battalion Chief Mackinnon. Behind him was a group of fascinated spectators—one girl gazing pop-eyed up over the Chief's icicle-draped helmet at something that seemed to terrify her. A third showed internes loading ambulances with the help of rubber-coated firemen in front of the brownstones.

The Marshal tossed the papers in the back seat, drove morosely uptown. He'd been in the department, and on his job, long enough not to be troubled by the bathos, the overemphasized sensationalism of newspaper coverage. Yet it always did bother him. He knew it was often the result of a newsman's inability to get more accurate information. But he wished that once, just once, the papers wouldn't steam up a lot of prejudiced suspicions pointing in the wrong directions.

The block between Broadway and Amsterdam looked, in the chill gray morning, like a battlefield. Charred chunks of wood, broken glass, warped steel beams, twisted pipe, rubble strewn from sidewalk to sidewalk.

And in the middle of the street, oblivious to everything except the yawning blackness of paneless windows on the eighth floor of the Wrenton, was the pop-eyed girl in the tabloid photo.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

SHE WORE A BEAVER shortie with a jaunty Cossack cap to match; it was the getup shown in the tabloid picture.

Maybe, he thought, she'd seen the photo already. Must be three or four morning papers in that roll she has tucked under her arm. She's a slick chick, all right. Smart style, good figure . . . what he could see of it. Slim legs, nice ankles. Hairdo in that horsetail on the nape of the neck fashion.

Not exactly pretty, though. Perhaps she would be if she didn't show such strain, staring up there at the eighth floor. Mouth too small, eyes too large in the same same face. But good-looking enough to be, say, a show girl.

He came up behind her. "Bad fire, hah?"

She brought an antagonistic gaze down to meet his. "Anyone ask your opinion?"

"Some have, at times. I'm with the Fire Department, Bureau of Fire Investigation.

"Live at the Wrenton, don't you?" It was the only reason he could think of, other than those newspapers, why she might have such a morbid interest in the hotel.

"No . . . I . . . do . . . not." The words were spaced in a manner intended to discourage further interrogation. "And if perchance you imagine you're going to follow me home, you're sadly mistaken. Go pick up somebody else if you have it on your mind this early in the morning."

"Saw you over here earlier, didn't I? Figure you must live around here."

"You did not see me earlier." She halted. "Simple reason I only got up half an hour ago. Nor do I live around here. Now will you quit annoying me!"

He took hold of her arm gently, touching the rolled-up papers as he did so. "Any special reason why you're so interested in the fire?"

"Do I have to have a special reason?"

"Thought you might know the girl who burned to death." A slight exaggeration but she probably wouldn't know it.

"Leggo my arm before I scream for that cop." She was coldly furious.

"No need of yelling. I'll take you right over to him." He began to urge her toward the traffic officer.

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She held back. "What the hell you want, mister?" A subtle change in her manner, possibly a flicker of fear in the greenish eyes.

"Some information. About you."

"I'm Mrs. Pauline Lowee, twenty-four, white, and American. I came out this morning to get some breakfast. I saw there'd been a fire. So I stopped to look at it. Does that make me guilty of something in your book?"

"You knew there'd been a fire before you set out to get breakfast. Because you were over here at half-past three this morning. Why the run-around, Mrs. Lowee?"

She pretended boredom. "So maybe I was here. Stopped on my way home from work. The fire wasn't out when I left to go home. I wanted to see what the final score was. That a crime, too?"

"What sort of job keeps you up till three, gets you up at seven?"

"I don't have to get up at seven. I just happened to, this morning. I'm a checkroom attendant at Club Choucoune. Try to make something out of that!"

"Ever meet up with Miss Vinny Rengist at your night club?"

"I see all kinds, good, bad, and impossible. Now if the homey little breakfast-club quiz is finished—"

"Not quite." He pulled her toward the hotel entrance. "Where do you live, no kidding?"

"At the Marville Arms. Eighty-second and West End Avenue. Two rooms and kitchenette, Apartment Four C. Gas stove, electric refrigerator, and telephone! Regent nine-oh-eight-two-eight. If a man answers it'll be my husband, and I wish for crysake he was here right now to see you manhandling me. Would he fix your wagon!"

"He a waiter at the Choucoune?" Pedley knew how many checkroom girls were married to waiters, headwaiters, musicians.

"He is not." Angrily she tried to jerk free. "He's a *mariachi.*"

"Yair? What's a *mariachi* do?"

"Plays a guitar, you dumbskull! Where are you taking me?"

"Up to see the rooms where the fire started." If he had expected her to show some sign of special interest or displeasure, she fooled him. "Fact is, I'm taking you in for a checkup, Mrs. Lowee. People were killed in this blaze, lots of others hurt. Party who set the fire'll have to face a judge for that. I'm supposed to round up that party, see he gets put where he belongs. May

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have to ask a lot of questions of people who don't know the answers, may have to step on some folks' toes before I'm through. Turns out they're the wrong toes, I'll apologize. But I won't be sorry. I'll step on a hundred if I have to."

She made a sudden attempt to wrench free by slipping one arm out of the beaver coat, dropping the newspapers, twisting away. But he held her, calmly explaining:

"If you don't have anything to hide, why make it look as if you had? I'm not a cop. I'm not interested in your police record, if you have one . . . unless it's for arson. I don't give a damn about your personal life . . . unless it has to do with this fire. Best thing for you to do is come along, nice and quiet, so we can get this checkup over."

She let him lead her, without further struggling, into the lobby, waited until Pete was taking them up to the eighth before she muttered, out of the corner of her mouth:

"If I could tip you off to something, would you slap me in jail as a witness?"

"Depends on what you know."

"I'm scared to say anything." She looked scared. "And don't give me any of that guff about the authorities protecting me; I've read the obituary notices of too many witnesses who've been 'protected.' "

He paused three doors away from 822. "If you're in danger because you know something about the firebug, the safest thing for you is to tell me so I can put him where he can't hurt you."

"He's there now. Where he can't hurt me, I mean. It's . . . friends of his, I'm afraid of."

"Raff Estero?" The hospital, that might be what she meant by "a safe place," even if she didn't know he was in the Detention Ward.

She evaded the question. "I don't want to talk here. Why don't you come over to my apartment?"

Was she propositioning him? He studied her. No suggestion of the sex approach in her direct, brooding stare. If it was a come-on she must have a bland confidence in her appeal. "Thought your husband was home."

She closed her eyes, leaned against the smoke-stained wall. "Raff's my husband." She kept her eyes shut until he spoke:

"Didn't bother to get a divorce before marrying the Rengist babe?"

"He didn't have to." She gazed blankly past the Marshal's

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shoulder. "He thought he didn't have to. I was his common-law wife."

"You were pretty sore about his leaving you." He made it a flat statement.

"Hell I was!" She seemed resentful, however. "It was a deal, the way he put it up to me. Like a business deal . . ."

"Sure," Pedley nodded. "This deal, now. Idea would have been for him to latch onto the Rengist dough, leave her, and come back to you?"

The flicker of apprehension came into her eyes again. "That was the way I understood it . . . or practically so. He promised that after six months or a year at most, with her, he'd get rid of her, and we'd both go abroad somewhere and take it easy on what he'd managed to wangle out of her." She hunched her shoulders suddenly as if a chill had struck her. "I didn't have any notion he meant to kill her, to get rid of her. I supposed he'd just leave her and sue, so she'd make some kind of settlement."

"You think he did kill her?"

She looked surprised. "You think he didn't? You don't know Raffael very well! He wouldn't think twice about setting fire to a block if it would harm somebody he hated. He hasn't the slightest feeling about any human being except himself."

Spite talk, he decided. Accusation with malice aforethought. Hell hath no fury like a common-law wife supplanted by a legal one. "You don't believe he cared anything about this Rengist girl?"

"Oh," she shrugged, "he probably did . . . after his own peculiar fashion. Up to a point, that is. He could be the most affectionate bastard in the world one minute and be trying to throttle you the next. I know. I lived with him. That's why I'm afraid. If he learns I've told anyone about this . . . he'll find some way to fix my wagon. I know it as sure as I know he started that fire." She clutched his arm. "He isn't able to get out of the hospital yet, is he?"

"No," Pedley said, dryly. "He might not be out for quite a while."

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHANER CROUCHED in the bathtub. "One'll get you two this print wasn't made by deceased." He focused the Specialex at the side

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of the medicine cabinet near the top. "She was too short to reach this far comfortably." The flash bulb popped. "That's the lot, coach. Sixteen shots. Seven or eight might develop identifiably. Most'll probably turn out to be the floor maids'. They got mulatto floor maids here, know that?"

"I count on you to ferret out fine points like that," Pedley said. "Where's this legal beagle who was so anxious to see me?"

"Down in the lobby using the public facilities. I didn't want him in here till I got through shooting."

"When you take Mrs. Lowee down, have him paged, will you? This is Mrs. Lowee. Ed Shaner, Deputy Marshal, B.F.I."

She said crossly, "Up to this morning I never even heard of this B.F.I. Now I'm up to my ears in marshals."

Shaner inspected her with mild approval. "Glad to have you in our midst."

"Mrs. Lowee is a gal-pal of Raff Estero."

"Was," she corrected.

"Was," Pedley agreed. "Palship ceased when Estero got tangled up with Miss Rengist. Mrs. Lowee's going downtown with you so Barney can take her deposition. Ollie'll be at the office. After Mrs. Lowee's read over her statement, you can turn her over to Ollie."

She fidgeted irritably. "What's he? A jailer? If you're going to fling me in the clink, I won't make any statement."

"You can go home after you've signed the deposition. Can't go to the Choucoune, of course. Ollie'll stay with you tonight."

"Any man stays overnight in my apartment," she flared, "I'll pick him out myself, thank you."

Shaner grinned. "Ollie's a perfect lady."

"A female marshal? Oh." She blinked in astonishment. "You have those, too?"

Pedley said, "Where are Exhibits A, B, and so forth, Ed?"

Shaner knelt by the made-up bed. "Had to tell Cap Stearns I'd already sent the stuff to the lab. I was afraid he'd impound the evidence." He reached under the box spring, pulled out a half a dozen aluminum refrigerator trays. "Borrowed these from the manager for a few days." He lifted two of the trays, set them on the spread.

Each tray had been wrapped in a pliofilm vegetable bag. Both were full of black, feathery ash. "This one is from the duct elbow, other from the walls of the air shaft." He deposited two more on the bed. "Rear of closet. Front of closet. In this

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one"—he put the remaining trays beside the others—"are toothbrushes, paste, razor, and blades from the medicine cabinet. And here we have part of the doorjamb showing the lock had been forced. Had to cut it out with a hack saw. And this's the key."

Pedley scowled. "Where'd you find that? I looked around for it. . . ."

Shaner stripped a slip off a pillow from the bride's bed. "So'd I. For half an hour, before I found it under the bureau. One of the boys must've booted it under there when he was making the room-to-room search."

"Yair? Dust that one for prints, unless you smeared your own all over it."

"You know me better'n that, coach." Shaner pulled a roll of surgeon's tape from his pocket, used the adhesive to fasten the trays in a pile. "Rubber-Glove Eddie, they call me in the lab."

"All right, all right. Get that film developed and up to Identification."

"If I don't bump into Cap Stearns and a writ of seizure." Shaner slid the pile inside the pillow slip. "Want me to tote that suitcase, too?"

"I'll take care of that." Pedley turned to the girl. "I'll be in touch with you, sometime this afternoon. Nothing to be afraid of; Ollie'll look after you."

The deputy took her arm. "*C'est vrai,* Mrs. Lowee. You can bank on Ollie, right down the line."

Pedley went in the bathroom, stood on the seat, put his head into the air shaft, craned his neck to stare up the narrow vault to where the perspectives of the sooty plaster centered in one small spark of daylight, a dozen floors above. He stayed there, motionless as a hunting dog on a point, until he heard the elevator door out in the corridor clang open again.

The man who knocked hesitantly a moment later was a tall, spare-framed individual with a Lincolnesque gauntness of face; if he had been wearing a denim shirt and overalls instead of a conservative business suit, he might easily be taken, Pedley thought, for a New Hampshire son of the soil. The humorous crinkles around the corners of the eyes were tempered by the thin grimness of the lips.

"Clarence Mathing." He shifted his vicuna overcoat to his left forearm, held out his right hand. "You are Marshal Pedley?"

"Right. My deputy tells me you're acting for the dead girl's

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mother." Pedley shook hands; the fellow had the flabby grip of an undertaker's assistant.

"Unofficially, at the moment. We don't want to get into legalities, if it can be avoided."

"Unusual position for an attorney."

"You seem to be under the impression I'm a lawyer. No, no. I'm just a friend of Lavinia's mother. Her father was about as close to me as a brother. Since his death I have been one of the executors of his estate. I feel distressed at this trouble Zelma Rengist is confronted with; I offered to help her in minimizing any scandal connected with her unfortunate child's name."

"I'm not concerned with scandal. Thirty or forty people got hurt; three or four died, Mister Mathing. What's the angle on scandal, anyway? Girl was married, wasn't she?"

"There seems to be some doubt as to the young man's right to another matrimonial venture, Marshal. Possibly I'm not in possession of all the facts. But I've been given to understand there's another young woman who has a prior claim to his name." Mathing's eyes tactfully avoided the mussed up bed. "However, that's all spilt milk; we hope no one brings it up; we certainly have no intention of doing so. Mrs. Rengist has no desire even to bring suit for the recovery of stolen property; she hopes it can all be settled without distasteful publicity."

"Who stole what?"

Mathing thrust out his lower lip. "You don't know about the jewels?"

"What jewels?"

"The young lady decamped with a case containing virtually all of the Rengist family heirlooms. Bracelets, rings, brooches. Diamonds, black opals, rubies. And the Marco Polo sapphire."

"Way you say it, it must be a right big rock."

Mathing smiled thinly. "It's the largest star sapphire in the world, sir, with the possible exception of one supposed to be in the Aga Khan's collection. Six hundred and forty carats. Much too large to be worn as a jewel, even if crowns were still in fashion. Its value lies as much in its remarkable history as in its unusual size; it was supposed to have been given by the Kublai Khan to Marco Polo, brought back from Peking, to Venice, and subsequently confiscated by the ruling house of Genoa at the time Venice was defeated in one of the Italian civil wars."

"Be hard to sell a pebble like that, wouldn't it?"

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"It would indeed, sir. That is one of the dangers. That the . . . ah . . . present possessor of the stone, finding that he can't cash in on it, may decide to drop it in the river rather than risk being caught with it."

"See what you mean."

"There are other very valuable gems in the Rengist family. Lavinia was the only heir. She would have had them all in a matter of a few years in any event, after Zelma passed on, possibly before that. Still, they weren't hers to take when she took them. And they don't seem to be here now."

"They weren't here when I got here this morning," Pedley admitted.

"Then evidently the young man has taken them. Of course he hasn't any vestige of right to them. I don't suppose he'll seriously contend he has. Mrs. Rengist is naturally much more affected by the tragedy of her daughter's death than by the loss of any precious stones, however valuable. But she is, quite understandably, incensed at young Estero, both for his callousness in regard to Mrs. Rengist's stand against this . . . um, peculiar liason . . . and also on account of his . . . ah . . . unnatural attitude toward Lavinia, herself. So I think I am safe in saying that under the circumstances, Zelma will go to extreme lengths to recover her property. Whether young Estero can be prosecuted for his part in the theft is probably of secondary importance, yet–"

"It's secondary to a couple of other things, too. One, kid's in the hospital suffering from smoke narcosis. Two, he's being detained pending an investigation about the origin of the fire here. If it turns out he set it, he'll be indicted for murder as well. What'd you mean by his unnatural attitude toward his wife?"

Mathing fiddled with the gold toilette set on the bureau. "Is this off the record? As far as the press is concerned?"

"Unless we have to use it to get a true bill from the grand jury, yair."

"Then you'd best get verification from Mrs. Rengist before you mention this to the Prosecutor's office. Because I can only repeat what she told me this morning."

"Repeat away."

"Mrs. Rengist had two telephone calls at her home in Scarsdale from this room last night." He fluttered his fingers. "Last night or early this morning, I don't know just when. One call was from her daughter. Lavinia wanted to tell her mother that

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it was too late to try and stop her from becoming Mrs. Estero. It wasn't, however, too late for Zelma to attempt to break up the honeymoon before it had really started; she begged and pleaded with Lavinia to come home and wait until a church ceremony could be arranged. The suggestion of a church wedding was probably only a pretext for postponing what Zelma considered the evil day when she'd have Estero for a son-in-law, but she did succeed in getting the girl to say she would leave her husband and come home within an hour or two. Zelma had to be content with that."

"And the second call?"

"Was an hour or so later. I'm not certain about the time situation here, but the call was from Estero. He informed his mother-in-law angrily and a little profanely that Lavinia wouldn't come home as she'd promised to. The reason was that Estero had said—and he told Mrs. Rengist this of his own free will—that he'd sworn to kill Lavinia if she left him."

CHAPTER NINE

WHAT'RE YOU STEWING ABOUT, Benjamin? Here you have an open-and-shut case with enough evidence to put Estero away until they use 2000 on the calendars. So you're not satisfied! You have to doubt the results of your own investigation. And why? Because you think somebody's trying to play the kid for a patsy? Because the blaze wasn't touched off the way a panicky youngster would have set it? Because a quarter-million bucks' worth of glitter has disappeared like smoke and there might be reasons not unconnected with the fire? No.

Admit it, he told himself glumly. You believe the kid was leveling when he told you how he felt about his bride. That's it and that's all. You're doing exactly what you're always cautioning Ed and Barney about—letting a preconceived notion color your opinion of the evidence. That's nokay, Benjamin.

He used the phone on the bedside table, rang his office.

"Barney? Ollie around?"

"She's still taking that deposition down on the old L. C. Smith. Want I should cut in on it?"

"No. Ask her to buzz me when she's through. Ed there?"

"At your beck and call . . . here. . . ."

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"Ed? Barno told you about the missing jewel box?"

"Yep. Sounds like an old M-G-M melodrama, kind they used to star William Powell in. Now we got the fortune in stolen ice, all we need is the psychopathic butler and we're ready to shoot the picture."

"Might even dig up one of those for you, before we're through with this. Meantime, shag around to the jewelry district up at Forty-seventh, see what you can find out about a star sapphire weighing six hundred carats. Call it the Marco Polo. Belonged to Mrs. Rengist. Was taken at the same time as the jewels. Want to know which insurance companies are holding the bag on it, so on."

"Will inquire, coach."

"Then do a rough check on brother Mathing, Ed. What's his standing in financial circles? How's his rep? So forth."

"Ought to be easy. Anything else?"

"Not for you. Back to Barno.... Barn?... ? What's with J. Humphrey Tarkk, Junior?"

"Quite some, boss. Want me to read it?"

"Shoot."

"Tarkk, Jerome Humphrey, Junior," Barney began. "Born, Livingston Manor, New York, April 9, 1930. Son of Jerome Humphrey Tarkk, Senior . . . industrialist and financier—that's from *Who's Who*—and Emily parenthesis Higginbotham parenthesis Tarkk, daughter American ambassador to Italy, 1904-1906—"

"Get to the meat course, Barney."

"O.K. J. Humphrey, Junior, went to St. Andrew's Academy, Middletown, Delaware, Princeton University parenthesis Class 1952 parenthesis. Lives Sixty-seven East Seventy-ninth Street, New York. Member of Indian Harbor Yacht Club, Greenwich Connecticut, Princeton Club, Shaker Ridge Country Club, Sons of the American Revolution. All that's from George at the *Trib*."

"Junior must drink that Whiskey of Distinction. What else?"

"He's a playboy. Spends a lot of time but not much money in 21, the Stork, and Toots'. Clean-cut, good dresser. Had a couple of jobs since leaving collitch. One summer, assistant golf pro at the Shaker Ridge. Went to Miami that winter, worked for a yacht broker, contacting the Gold Coast set. Present job, customer's man for investment house downtown, Brounham, Mathing, Sussfield and Rhine."

"Hah! Can you catch Ed, tell him that?"

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"He'll be down in the barbershop."

"Get it to him, Barn'."

"There's more, boss. J. Humphrey has a nickname. Call him Little Hump; old man, natch, is Big Hump. What my spies tell me, both of 'em come by the tag honestly. Old boy has the rep of being a ladies' man; kid is dame-dotty."

"Workmanlike job of digging, Barnabus. Might get a Dun and Bradstreet rating on the Tarkk financial status. And don't forget to have Ollie give me a bell here at the Wrenton."

He packed the gold toilette set in the suitcase. A blond hair trailed from the bristles of the brush like a silvery strand of spiderweb.

Maybe her mother had been right; perhaps it had been a case of infatuation that might not have been expected to last. Still, the girl had a right to make up her own mind. What the hell had happened last night to turn the honeymoon into a nightmare?

Take it from Estero's viewpoint. He'd spent some time with his bride, then decided to go down to rustle up some sandwiches. While he was away someone got into 822, attacked the wife, stunned her, and set fire to the rubbish in the air shaft, hoping the assault on the bride would never be discovered. Must have been someone she knew intimately, otherwise she'd never have unlocked the door.

That is, he told himself, if Estero wasn't Jekyll-Hyding it.

He packed the lingerie from the bureau, took down from the back of the door the framed diagram of the hotel with the red line showing the direction to take to reach the nearest fire escape.

The phone rang. It was Ollie:

"Now I know how a psychiatrist feels after some patient has unloaded his troubles on the doctor, Ben. I'm so sorry for that girl I could have a nervous breakdown myself, out of sympathy."

"Think she's telling the truth, the whole truth, and so on?"

"I don't know. Probably not the whole truth. Likely some of it is anything but true. But one thing sure, she's still under Estero's spell."

"Yair? I had the impression he's poison to her, now."

She laughed softly. "That's one of the things I like about you, Ben—you know so little about women. She's so crazy about him she'd do anything to make him take notice of her again: hurt him, get him jailed, sent to the chair. So she could rush to comfort him, don't you understand?"

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"Vaguely. On that basis if she hated the kid she'd be real sweet to him."

"Not at all. She'd try to hurt him, but she wouldn't rush to comfort him when he was down."

"I'm glad you're around to explain these matters, Ollie."

"Oh, you! But I am sorry for her. I think she's had a raw deal from life in general."

"If you'd had to ransom your hat from checkroom girls at two bits a throw three or four hundred times a year, you might think she'd had it pretty soft. You're going back uptown with her?"

"My overnight bag is down in the car. I'm all set."

"I wish you weren't going to use it to spend the evening with Pauline Lowee."

"Hm . . ." She paused. "Will I see you later in the day?"

"I'll look in at the Lowee apartment in a couple of hours, say, noon at the latest. Take a copy of the deposition with you, hah?"

"Always try to anticipate your wishes, you know that, Ben." She hung up.

He lugged the suitcase out to the elevator, thumbed the "down" button. There was a new man on the car when it came up, a white-haired little old man with a dried-up winter-apple face and sharp blue eyes. "You Mister Pedley, sir?"

"S'me."

"Couple police officers downstairs askin' for you."

Cap Stearns. Looking for something to cut Homicide in on the case. Something to get a few paragraphs in the paper. Nuts to them. "Tell you what. When you get to the lobby, I'll step out and speak to these cops. You hang around a minute, then run this suitcase out to my car, the red sedan with the eighty-six on the front. Right?"

"You don't want 'em to know it's your suitcase?"

"That's the ticket."

"Take care of it for you, sir."

Captain Stearns and one of his plain-clothes men were waiting by the desk. The Captain was a solid man who could have filled a barrel with his bulk and no room left over. He beamed broadly.

"Order for you, Marshal. Official, from your Commissioner."

"Why don't you stick to your side of the street, Cap?"

"This is my side, Marshal. Homicide. Medical examiner states the girl was struck a savage blow with some weapon, shortly before her death."

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Pedley said, "What's the order? Turn over to you everything that's in the room where the body was found?"

"Saved a lot of trouble if you'd done it in the first place."

Pedley saw the operator march out to the sidewalk with the girl's suitcase. "I don't think it would have helped matters any. But if City Hall's been pressuring my Commissioner, that's enough for me. You can take over."

Stearns clapped him on the shoulder with an air of paternal condescension. "We'll get together before they get the case ready for the grand jury. See you, Ben."

They were on their way up when Sam slid out from behind the switchboard. "Didn't want to give out these when the police were here, Marshal." He held out a thin packet of room registration cards. "The twenty-two's, like you asked for. Nine-twenty-two, ten-twenty-two. . . . Eight-twenty-four was an empty.

"Obliged, Sam." He shuffled through the cards rapidly. Harold Curran, Mr. and Mrs. Edward White, Tim Stoneham and wife. *J. Humphrey Tarkk, Jr.!*

Little Hump had occupied 1222 the night before.

CHAPTER TEN

THE CLOCK ON THE DASHBOARD said 8:19 when he kicked the starter into life in front of the Wrenton and 8:22 when he slurred around the corner of Madison into Seventy-ninth. In that three minutes he had compressed some half-dozen conjectures as well as some chancy driving across the Seventy-second transverse through the wintry park.

Had Little Hump trailed the newlyweds to their honeymoon hotel in order to be revenged? If so, why hadn't he registered under a *nom d'hôtel* to conceal his identity—as undoubtedly many of the other guests had done for a less sinister reason.

How had the former fiancé learned where Raff had taken his bride? Tarkk had checked in, according to the registration card, at 11:45; had that been after the girl had phoned her mother? The stout night operator on the hotel switchboard had departed at seven; she had given her toll-charge slips to the day-side assistant manager; he had gone out to breakfast and no one knew where the slips were. Probably Mrs. Rengist had wangled

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the name of the hotel out of her daughter on that first call. The mother might have notified the rejected suitor, who could have decided to take matters in his own hands by going directly to the Wrenton and getting a room.

The fire could have been started as easily from 1222 as from 822, by tossing a blazing roll of tissue down that air shaft onto the convenient shelf between the seventh and eighth floors. But Tarkk's presence in the room four floors above the Starrs didn't explain how Little Hump had managed to get into the bridal couple's room. It didn't seem likely that the almost-naked wife would have opened the door for a man she must have expected would be enraged.

He parked both his car and any probable conclusions, surprised at discovering Sixty-seven to be a converted four-story residence made over into apartments. Not much of an address for a "financier and industrialist." Fine neighborhood but limited living quarters. Maybe the financier wasn't doing so well. . . .

The Tarkks lived in the first-floor apartment. A Puerto Rican maid said No, Mister Humphrey wasn't in, neither his father was, either. No, she didn't know when they'd be back; she thought young Mister Humphrey had gone out to Scarsdale, but she couldn't say for sure. No, she couldn't say why young Mister Humphrey had gone out theah.

He used the two-way set, speeding over to the East River Drive and north, notified the dispatcher at Communications Central of his destination, asked that his office be advised.

The Rengist estate in Scarsdale was something else again. An imposing three-story Norman structure of yellow brick with half a dozen tall chimneys was framed at the end of a long avenue of cypress. A glassed-in porch on one wing balanced a glassed-in conservatory on the other. Garages and stables flanked the mansion.

A Rolls and a Buick station wagon were lined up outside the garage. In the driveway was a bright yellow Alfa Romeo with New York license plates.

He half-expected a liveried footman to admit him. Instead a skinny, stern-jawed old woman with black dress and starchy collar barred him from entering.

"Mrs. Rengist?" he said.

"Who you?" A heavy accent, German.

"Pedley." That shouldn't mean much to her, one way or another.

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"What you want to see her about?"

"Her daughter."

"Miss Vinny dead."

"That's why I want to see her mother."

"Ain't home." The old woman tried to close the front door.

Pedley got his foot in it, put his shoulder to the panel, and pushed. The old woman cried, "Here!"

He shoved her aside, strode in.

A young man burst out of the room from which the caterwauling had come. "What goes, Magda?" He advanced truculently. He wore a shaggy heather tweed, heavy British shoes, very country squire-ish.

Pedley recognized the good-natured florid features he'd seen on the Peter Arno character at the Wrenton, but without the older man's white walrus mustache. "I do," he said. "I go right in to Mrs. Rengist."

"In a pig's pazook!" Little Hump came at him.

By the foot of a majestic staircase was a Chinese vase used as an umbrella holder. Pedley seized an umbrella that was tightly furled, pulled it out. "Matter of fact, I came to get you, Tarkk."

"You and what squad of blues?" The other hesitated, however.

Fellow must weigh in at two hundred, Benjamin. Looks fit, too. He can maul you. "Want some information about what you were doing in the Wrenton Towers last night, early this morning."

Tarkk, Junior, stepped in with the poised swiftness of the trained athlete, chopped at Pedley's jaw with a swift jab. The Marshal ducked, side-stepping, but he wasn't quick enough. He rode with the punch to take the sting out of it, but it slammed him against the newel post, rocked him back on his heels, threw him off balance.

He saw the right coming up. Blocked it with his forearm. Lunged in with the umbrella as if using a rapier. He put his weight behind it. The steel ferrule caught Little Hump at the Adams apple.

They both went down, Pedley dazed from the fist that had connected with the angle of his jaw, Little Hump clutching at his throat, making gasping, strangling sounds.

Pedley got a knee under him, started to haul himself erect by holding to the newel post. Little Hump, now purple in the face, kicked him in the knee.

From the living room the banshee wail rose higher. Little

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Hump made a feeble effort to kick at Pedley's knee once more but couldn't make it, flopped flat on his back.

Pedley caught the old woman's arm as she was about to brain him with a cut-glass card dish. "That'll be all of that." He twisted her arm a little. The cut glass smashed on the parquet.

"You kill him!" she croaked.

"Not yet." He shoved her away, bent over Little Hump. Blood trickled from the corner of the Tarkk mouth, but the purplish color was leaving the clean-cut features. "Leave him alone. He'll come around. His throat'll relax now; he'll get his breath back."

She rubbed her wrist resentfully. "You kill him."

He went into the living room. An enormously fat woman lay on a chaise longue in front of a log fire. She wore an evening dress—pink satin and sequins—but neither shoes nor stockings. Her eyes were open, but she didn't seem to see him; the eyes had the appearance of skinned grapes set in a round loaf of unbaked dough. The nostrils of her short, upturned nose had a faintly snoutish look. Her mouth hung slackly open.

He realized she was stupefied with liquor but couldn't see any around. "Mrs. Rengist." He shook a bare arm as large as a pale, white ham.

"Droonk," the old woman said.

"No fooling!" He flexed his knee, which felt as if a steel beam had fallen on it. "When'd she start to hit the bottle?"

"This morning when she hear about Miss Vinny."

"Can't you keep it away from her?"

"Why?"

He couldn't answer that one. "Mister Mathing, has he been here today?"

"Here this morning."

"Couldn't he stop her from making a pig of herself?"

"Nobody stop her."

He gave up, went out to the hall. Little Hump was sitting on the floor, leaning against the newel post, massaging his throat.

"On your feet, Tarkk."

"In your hat," the other croaked.

"You want to do it the hard way, 's O.K. with me. But one way or another, you're going to do it."

"Do what?" Tarkk made an effort to stand.

"Come back to the Wrenton with me. So I can let some of the hotel people look at you to see if they remember taking you from the twelfth to the eighth early this morning. Or saw you prowl-

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ing around the corridors." He let go; bits of hair fluttered from his fingers. "Which way you want it?"

Little Hump got up. "Get me to a doctor."

"You'll be where you can get good medical attention in a little while. Out. Move."

Pedley opened the door of the sedan. A sepulchral squawk from the loud-speaker on the dash:

"Second . . . on a second to Box Nine-twenty-eight. . . . West End at Eighty-second. . . . Engine Forty-five, Engine Forty-four, Truck Sixteen . . . Tower One. . . . Second alarm the Marville Arms. . . ."

Ollie! The Lowee apartment! Christ! He slid behind the wheel.

Little Hump came back with his overcoat.

"Tuck your ears in," Pedley said tightly. "We're going to hit the high spots."

He set the Mars light to weaving, put the buckeye whistle on automatic. The red finger on the speedometer swung around to seventy, kept climbing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE GRAY RIBBON of concrete unrolled at a terrifying speed. The black lacework of trees and shrubs became a dark blur against the snowy countryside.

Little Hump hawked and spat. "If I'd known you were official, I wouldn't have tried to stop you from seeing Mrs. Rengist. I thought you were another of those lousy reporters who'd been chivvying her."

"Horsefeathers! You knew I wasn't any newspaperman."

"How the hell would I have known what you were after!"

"You knew. You were at the Wrenton last night."

"So . . . ?"

"Why were you?"

The red sedan zoomed up a parkway rise, had shrieked halfway down the grade on the other side before Little Hump snarled:

"Because a dirty scum-bum of a half-breed had my girl in a room there. That's why! I'd have killed the bastard if I could have; I meant to . . . only I never caught up with him."

"How'd you know where he took her?"

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"Vinny called her mother; when Mrs. Rengist answered the telephone, she heard the operator say, 'Wrenton Towers,' to someone else calling in to the switchboard. I was there at the house; we knew Vinny'd run away with the rat because all the things were gone off her bureau and a bunch of jewelry was missing, too. So I was waiting there to see if she'd call in. When she did, I drove straight to the hotel to try to break it up."

"Tried to before then, hadn't you?"

"Damn right, I had. She wouldn't listen to me. Bastard had her hypnotized. If she'd listened to me she'd be alive right now." Little Hump wiped his mouth, eyed the handkerchief glumly. "Or if I'd been able to get my hands on Estero."

The sedan passed a startled motorcycle cop as if he'd been on a scooter. "You couldn't locate them at the hotel?"

"They weren't registered under his name. I gave the hotel a buzz before I went in; they never heard of any Mr. and Mrs. Estero. So I asked what garage the Towers used; they sent me around to the Red Ace on Seventy-seventh. The night man there remembered an orange Mercury that had come in a few hours before. Well, I knew the little skunk drove an orange convertible, but the man said the name wasn't Estero, it was Starr. I left my bus there, went out, and called the Wrenton. They had a Mr. and Mrs. Starr all right, in room eight-twenty-two. When I went down, knocked on the door, and she asked who was there and I spoke to her, all she said was 'Go away and leave us alone'!"

"Did you?"

"What the hell else could I do? All I could do was go back to my room and call Mrs. Rengist, ask her to see if Vinny'd talk to her."

Little Hump massaged his throat gently with his left hand. "Her mother got through to her, all right, but she couldn't get anywhere with Vinny. Vinny said she'd quit home for good, she was going to stay with her half-breed no matter what, nothing her mother could do would make her leave her—" he gagged on the word—"her husband."

T'aint the way I heerd it. Pedley slowed to sixty-five as he swung into the Cross County. Mathing allowed as how the girl had agreed to come home. "Didn't leave you much ground to interfere any more, did it?"

"I didn't try. I thought probably the reason the old fathead—Mrs. Rengist is plastered about three-quarters of the time—couldn't convince Vinny it was better to quit that little bastard

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while she had a chance was because the old lady was too drunk to make sense on the phone. All I could do was go get my car, park as near the hotel as I could, wait there until they showed up in the morning."

"What time would that've been? When you gave it up as a bad job?"

"Around two, I suppose. Anyhow I didn't get the bus right away. I went to that Riker's All-Nite Eats and had a couple of hamburgs. I guess the garage ticket'll show what time I did get the Alfa; I was too sunk to think about it."

"Sit there alone, in the car, then?" Out of the corner of his eye, Pedley could see Little Hump turn his head to peer at him.

"Certainly I was alone! Who the hell did you think I had with me?"

"Thought maybe you'd rung your father in on the deal."

"Crysake, no. I'd given him a buzz to let him know I wouldn't be home, and why. But it wasn't any of his business."

"What I thought. Why'd he go to the hotel, then?"

Little Hump said, "What? He didn't!"

"Yair."

"I said he did not!"

"Saw him coming out of the hotel after the fire. Elevator man said he'd come from the twelfth floor. Your room was twelve-twenty-two."

There was an appreciable pause. Then: "You're mistaken. My father never was near the lousy hotel."

"We'll see what he has to say about it."

"Now, listen!"

"*You* listen! People were killed in that fire, a fireman was killed. The fire was set. It was set to get the girl or Estero or both, maybe as a cover-up for theft of the box of glitter. You were there; so was your father. If you think we're not going to ask a lot of embarrassing questions to get to the bottom of it, you're soft in the skull."

Little Hump breathed heavily, but kept his mouth shut as the sedan cannoned down the West Side highway, swung off at Seventy-ninth.

There was no column of smoke rising from the limestone cube that was the Marville Arms, but apparatus still clogged the streets on two sides. Pedley slurred to a slushy stop, beckoning, as he stepped out, to a uniformed patrolman at the fire line. "Officer . . . here."

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The policeman stared, then hurried over. "Hullo, Marshal."

"Keep an eye on the customer in my car, will you? I'm going inside for a little; want him here when I get back."

"You bet . . . he'll be here."

"Might take the gun he has in the right-hand pocket of his overcoat; he's not going to need it right away."

The officer's glance went to Little Hump, back to the Marshal. "Take care of that, right away."

Pedley rounded the corner toward the main entrance of the Arms. The pavement, the brown-gray heaps of snow at the curbs glittered with shards of broken glass. He looked up. Nearly every window on this side of the building had been blown out.

A familiar voice called hoarsely, "Where you been?"

"Hi, Jack." Pedley picked his way across hose lines toward the Batallion Chief. "What you got?"

"Something in your line this time and no mistake about it, Ben. Whole damn basement blew up—gasoline fumes. Where the hell were you, you didn't hear it?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

HE INSPECTED THE CROWD as he came around to the main entrance on West End. It was different from the crowd at the Wrenton last night; fat housewives in wool dresses and fur overcoats, old men in ulsters, mufflers, and galoshes. There were no tall willowy girls in smartly fitted suits who might have been Ollie Bresnahan.

A young lieutenant from Engine 34 came out of the Arms, his rubber boots slipping on the yellowish ice that flowed out of the lobby like delta mud; from a white x of adhesive on the angle of his jaw ran a small black ribbon of dried blood.

Pedley said, "All out safe?"

The lieutenant pushed the helmet back off his forehead. "Yeah, anyway all safe, Marshal. Didn't try to get 'em out, didn't have time. Building was blasting away like an ammo dump on fire when we got here. We were first-due engine. We knew there'd been an explosion because the elevator bulkhead had blown, flames was shooting up in the air about thirty feet above the roof line. But we didn't figure on another explosion; Christ, there was two!"

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"Where?" Pedley peered up at the fourth-floor windows, hoping to catch sight of his dainty deputy.

"Basement, Marshal. Gasoline fumes. Seeped down the shaft of the automatic elevator, filled the basement. Either they let go when the mixture reached the level of the oil burner or a spark from the elevator switch touched her off. Christ! They was fifty little fires going when we lugged in that first charged line. Woodwork in the halls, on the stairs. Flame just flashed right up that shaft, honeycombed the whole building."

"Sure it wasn't illuminating gas?"

"No. Come from a gallon can. Paint can. Up on the top floor. By the elevator shaft. Tipped on its side. Leak in the top of the can, you can see for yourself. Blowoff caused wiring shorts, busted the gas main, knocked over electric heaters . . . but it never touched that goddamn can. It's still up there. I knew you'd want it left like it was."

"Good man." A gallon paint can, full of gas! Pedley had one of those, down at the office; one that had been Exhibit A in the case of County of New York vs. Estero, Raffael. Sounds like Raff, up to the same old trick that reduced a hundred-thousand-dollar schoolhouse to a heap of rubble. Sounds like what a revengeful kid would try to do to get even with his gal-pal who'd crossed him up by talking to the authorities. "I'll go look-see. Thanks for not disturbing the evidence."

He went in, crunching glass under his shoes. This couldn't be the kid's doing; he's in the D ward. Might be some of his buddies, though. If the Lowee babe had been right about being afraid of them.

Apartment 4-C was on the side away from the smashed windows on the street. There was no name in the tiny black card receptacle above the push button. He knocked.

A pleasantly lilting voice called, "Who do you want?"

"All right, Ollie." He was surprised to discover how relieved he was to hear her voice, knowing really that she was safe.

When she opened the door, he had a small shock. Across the left side of the delicate oval face was a latticework of criss-crossed Band-Aids. The dark hair, ordinarily sleek, looked as if Ollie'd lost a weekend in a Pier Six free-for-all. Her upper lip was swollen. The crisp collar of her peppermint-candy blouse had been torn.

He glanced past her; nothing in the apartment seemed to have

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been shaken up. "You didn't get that from being tossed around by the blast," he said.

She grinned, lopsidedly. "What I got for winning an argument, Ben."

"Hope the other party looks worse." He put a hand on her shoulder.

"Very little damage on either side." She led him back to the living room. "You see, Kilroy was here.

"We had a visitor. He rang the bell, but before I could see who was there, Mrs. Lowee was trying to prove she's the catch-as-catch-can champ of the upper West Side. She thought it was her ex-boy friend calling."

"Raff Estero?"

"Yes. Said she recognized his ring. He called to her, too . . . 'Pauline.' Then she was positive. I told her it couldn't possibly be Estero because he was under guard at Bellevue. But she was hell-bent on keeping me from going to the door to see who it was." Ollie patted the torn collar ruefully. "She did keep me from getting there in time to let him in; when I finally opened the door, he'd gone."

"How long before the explosion was this?"

"Possibly ten minutes," she said. "When that came, of course she was convinced he'd tried to blow her up."

"Can't say I blame her. Where is she?"

"There . . . in the bedroom. Praying." Ollie smoothed the rumpled tresses. "She's ready to jump right out of her socket, Ben. I think maybe I ought to hop down to the drugstore, get her some phenobarbs or something to let her get to sleep. She's shot, no fooling."

"Shouldn't wonder. Blast was pretty bad, even in here?"

"Thought the walls of Jericho had really tumbled down." She grinned, placidly. "Does it tie in, Ben?"

"All part and parcel, I'd say. See if the lady's decent. Few questions to ask her."

His eyes followed her to the bedroom door, trying to imagine her lithe suppleness engaged in a hair-pulling, face-clawing Kilkenny with the girl in there.

"Come on in." Ollie smiled down at the tear-streaked, fear-twisted features scrunched into the pillows.

Pauline Lowee didn't wait for his questions. "This is some of your you'll-be-safer-with-him-in-jail crap, wisehead!"

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"Haven't been hurt, have you?" He spoke with more assurance than he felt. "You won't be, either."

"Not your fault I wasn't. He got out of your goddamn hospital. He tried to kill me, and everybody else here in the Arms, and it was only luck he missed. I told you he'd try—he'll try again—next time that'll be it." She burst into a paroxysm of weeping, flung herself face down on the bed.

Pedley gripped her shoulder. "You were so keyed up you imagined you heard his voice, that's all."

She wrenched free from his hand, propped herself up with one hand. "I know his ring at that doorbell, you thick dick! I've heard it a thousand times—*zing-zing-z-i-i-i-ng*. It was Raff. I know it. I don't give a good goddamn what you say. Besides, how could I help recognizing him when he called my name! You act like I'm nuts," she sobbed. "It's you that's nuts!"

They went back to the living room, closed the door on the spasmodic sobbing. Pedley said, "Was the bell ring like that?"

"Yep. *Bzz, bzz, bzzzz.* The open-sesame business, Ben."

He frowned, picked up the phone.

Ollie put her hand over the receiver, whispering, "If you were going to call the Detention Ward, I did that."

He waited, still holding the phone.

"Estero's not there," she went on softly. "He was taken away about eight forty-five by a detective from the Homicide Bureau."

"Did you check them?"

Ollie nodded. "Captain Stearns wasn't available. The guy I talked to thought there was a report about Raff's breaking away, but he didn't know any details."

He swore under his breath.

"I'm sorry, Ben." She put her hand on the back of the one holding the receiver. "I know how you feel about that kid."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A RED-HELMETED salvage man, brooming water down the stairs to the fifth, recognized Pedley as he came out of 4-C. "These damn-fool tenants don't know when they're lucky, Marshal. They could easy have been blown clear over to Riverside Park an' all

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they do is beef about their rugs bein' ruined! That dame in Five B, you'd of thought I was pers'nally responsible!"

He splashed on up; the blackened ceilings dripped; rivulets coursed down scorched plaster to form sooty pools on the stairs. Why had Raff made a getaway, if he wasn't guilty? If this fire hadn't been set by Estero, who had known enough about that schoolhouse blaze to use the same method in starting this one? Who had put the slug on the girl in the Wrenton?

No plausible answers suggested themselves.

On the top landing a squat, paunchy man in a torn gray sweater and a bedraggled beret scowled up at the open sky through the blown-out bulkhead. On the roof a couple of firemen from a truck company were rigging a weather tarpaulin.

Pedley nodded. "You the super?"

"Yuh. You'll be from the boiler comp'ny?"

"No. Fire Department. Bureau of Investigation."

"Yair." A yellow gallon can with "Tarheel Turpentine, the Painter's Choice" in black letters on its rectangular sides lay on the tiled landing, its round metal cap touching the grillwork of the elevator shaft. "Know anything about this?"

The superintendent blinked. "Never even noticed it."

"Not one you had lying around the basement?"

"Never allow no stuff like that stored on the premises, no sir. To my knowledge, I never seen that can before."

"Expect not." The smell of gasoline was strong. Pedley put on his cotton work gloves. "This was the bomb that blew up your boiler." The cap was still screwed on tightly but in the yellow top near the cap was a tiny slit not more than a quarter of an inch long. "Somebody fixed it so the gas that was in it would seep out a few drops at a time. The heavy vapor sank down the shaft to the basement. When it filled your cellar up to the level of the flame in the oil burner . . . *voom!*"

"Jeeze! Mean it was tipped over like that on purpose to blow the place up! Who'd do a thing like that?"

This wasn't the way that Harlem school had been torched. There the gas had been poured over a pile of textbooks and stationery supplies and the whole thing lit. This was trickier; this, like the blaze in the air shaft at the Wrenton, might have been accidental. "Know the couple in Four C?"

"The Lowees?" The corners of the superintendent's mouth came down, his shaggy eyebrows went up. "You think one of them put that can there?"

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"Can't say. Don't know. Just asking. Might be the idea was to blow one of them into the morgue. Did the Lowees seem to get along pretty well, before he left?"

The paunchy man shifted the beret on his head. "Oh, I guess they scrapped, like most married folks. They didn't throw no weekend riots, like some. Very little in the drunky line."

Pedley went down to 4-C; Ollie let him in.

A steaming percolator stood on the low-slung table. Ollie dropped two lumps of sugar in a cup, added a drop of cream, poured the coffee. "On the house, Ben."

"I need it." He set the can on the carpet.

She regarded the turpentine container solemnly. "Was that the fuse?"

"Yair." He pointed to the slit. "Somebody punched it with a knife blade. Probably to keep his prints off the can." He sighed. "I still don't think the kid did it. Do you have a copy of that deposition?"

"Right here." She opened her handbag. "It's quite an opus. She dictated a full fourteen pages."

"Did she mention any quarrel with Estero after this scheme to marry the Rengist girl was agreed upon?"

"No. Here." She unfolded it, held it out.

He read:

QUESTION: Did you see Raffael much after he started paying attention to Miss Rengist?

ANSWER: Oh, yes. I saw him every few days and he would call me on the telephone every afternoon about the time I got up.

QUESTION: Where did you see him? At your apartment?

ANSWER: Sometimes he would come home with me after the club closed, and sometimes I would see him at the club, those evenings when Vinny Rengist wasn't around.

QUESTION: Did you ever regret having made this bargain not to interfere with his marriage to Miss Rengist even though you felt you had a prior right to his name?

ANSWER: I suppose sometimes I was kind of jealous, seeing him play up to her the way he did and how she

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would look at him and hang onto his hand and all that, but I never was really upset about it until I saw the fire there in the hotel and knew he must have set it to get rid of her. Then I got frightened because I figured that if he would do a horrible thing like that to her, he might decide to do the same to me one of these fine days.

Pedley snapped his finger at the thin sheets. "That's the nub, Ollie. Right there."

She said she didn't quite catch on.

"She's trying to make the kid out a homicidal maniac. That's a lot of horse. My opinion, he's badly busted up by the Rengist girl's death. If that's so, he didn't plan to burn the hotel, roast her. Other hand, if he was putting on an act just to make it look as if he'd cared for his overnight bride . . . it would have been because he was still that way about Mrs. Lowee, wanted to clear the way so he could go back to her. In which case, absolutely the last thing he'd have done would have been to firebrand both of them."

"Not," Ollie agreed, "unless he is a homicidal maniac."

He rattled the deposition sheets. "Point is, this crack about 'seeing the fire' and 'knowing he'd set it.' How'd she know? How'd she get wind of the fact that Raff was in the Wrenton with his new wife?"

"She read it in the papers." Ollie put an arm around his shoulders, riffled through the pages.

"Huh," Pedley snorted, "she knew before the papers came out. At the time she first stood out in the street gawking up at that window; the *News* photographer caught her, then. Picture showed her staring as bug-eyed as if her best friend was trapped up there. Now, how'd she find out he was there?"

"I'll try to get an answer to that, when she wakes up."

"Did you give her a mickey?"

"Nothing but Demerols, Ben. She won't feel too bad when she comes out of it."

"Don't be too sure. If Raff thinks she set the Wrenton fire, he might try to square things up for the dead girl, after his cock-eyed fashion."

"That could have been a reason for making his escape." Ollie attempted a refill, but he shook his head.

"Yair. He'll be out for revenge. That's one thing makes me feel he isn't guilty. If he were, he wouldn't have anything to lose

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by sitting tight and waiting for trial. This way, he's got two strikes against him before he ever gets into court."

"Probably he still has a key to this apartment, Ben. I might have to drop off for forty winks myself . . . and if I should . . ."

"I'll get someone to patrol the lobby downstairs. But I wouldn't get too steamed up. Raff might try to beat us to the firebug, in which case there just possibly might be another homicide. However, he might have someone else besides Mrs. Lowee in mind."

"Such as and for instance . . . ?"

"Guy the dead girl was engaged to before she went ga-ga over Estero. Lad name of J. Humphrey Tarkk, Junior. He's in my car outside, now."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A LANKY INDIVIDUAL in an olive-drab shortcoat with a sheepskin collar lounged against the right-front door of the Marshal's car.

Pedley hailed the policeman. "Who's the joe chumming up to your prisoner, officer?"

"Newspaperman, Marshal. From the *Trib*." The cop took a nickel-plated hammerless out of his overcoat. "Here's the popper I took away from him. You didn't say anything about keeping the guy muzzled."

"Didn't think it'd be necessary," Pedley growled, putting the gun in his hip pocket.

The leg man turned. "Holding out on the press, Marshal?"

Pedley opened the door on the wheel side, set the wrapped can on the back seat. "Never knew me to, did you?"

"Many a time and oft. Here and now, f'rinst. Mister Tarkk here tells me the joe who was with the Rengist babe in the Wrenton lives in this apartment house. Suggests a connection between the fires. Don't suppose it's news to you, but it will be to our readers."

Pedley looked sourly at Little Hump. "Where'd you get your info? Superintendent doesn't seem to know any tenant named Estero."

Tarkk, Junior, reddened. "I had occasion," he answered stiffly,

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"to look into the so-called private life of this snotty little guitarist. I found out he was living here with a fluffie supposed to be his wife, a checkroom girl at the hot spot where he earns his living wheedling table tips."

The *Tribune* man began, "Know her name, Mister—?"

But Pedley cut in: "You wise the man to your having been registered at the Wrenton last night, yourself, Tarkk?" He slid beneath the wheel, kicked the starter.

"Hey!" The reported caught hold of the door frame. "Are you booking him as a suspect, Marshal?"

"Same like you, just making inquiries." Pedley revved the motor, shifted gears preparatory to letting in the clutch. "All this is strictly off the record, anyhow. Don't quote me."

"Goddamn it, you can't do that to—" the reporter's voice was lost in the exhaust as the red car began to roll.

Little Hump growled, "I think that was uncalled for! There was no need to drag my name into the papers!"

"Oh, horse! Girl you were engaged to gets barbecued in a hotel fire. You were in the hotel at the time. You admit you went there to try and break up her intimacy with the rival who'd beaten your time. You try to implicate him in another arson job because you're a sore loser. You dragged your own name into it along with his and this night-club girl. Don't blame me."

"I'm not, really. No one's to blame except that mucking half-breed," Little Hump fumed. "Damn good thing you put him away where nobody can get at him. I'd kill the bastard on sight, I tell you that!"

"You may have your chance." Pedley parked against a mound of glass-sprinkled snow on the Seventy-fifth Street side of the Towers. "Estero's not in custody now."

"You . . . let him go?"

"He got away." Pedley didn't bother to explain.

A look of panic flashed into Little Hump's eyes. "Is there . . . will there be an alarm out to have him picked up?"

"Sure." The Marshall was offhand. "You want to ask the authorities to post a cop in front of your house, to protect you?"

"I don't need any lousy bodyguard," Little Hump blustered. "If that creep comes sneaking around me—" He didn't finish.

"Come on." Pedley got out. "Let's go upstairs, see if we can find out what your father was looking for in your room."

Pedley said, "Let's have your room key."

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"Why . . . I haven't got it." Little Hump looked startled. "I turned it in at the desk."

"Yair? How'd your father get in your room?" Pedley signaled the white-haired bellman who'd helped him get the suitcase out from under Stearns's nose. "Key for twelve-twenty-two."

"Yes, sir." The bellman tugged at his monkey jacket, stalling. "Your room, sir?"

"This gentleman's. Snap it up." Pedley saw Higgins behind the desk, gave him the high sign. The bellman scurried away.

"There's abolutely nothing in my room," Little Hump ventured. "I don't see what you expect to find there."

Pedley prodded him into the up car. The new operator was a slick-haired youth of twenty with an insolent expression and a receding chin.

There wouldn't be much use, the Marshal decided, in trying to pump these day-shift employees. None of them would be likely to know what had happened up in 822 or who had prowled the corridor outside it.

The bellman returned. "Twelve-twenty-two, yes, sir."

"Thanks. Tell your operator the Fire Marshal's going to use the phone up there, will you?"

The carpet on the twelfth-floor corridor was spongy with water. Two mulatto floormaids scrubbed at soot-stained wallpaper.

"Made up twelve-twenty-two yet?" Pedley asked.

"No, sir. We're only cleaning out here, until noon," one answered. "Hour and a half to go . . . an' then we still got to rack up all them rooms."

"Don't bother with twenty-two. That's an order. From the Fire Department." He used the key.

Little Hump seemed to be right. Apparently there wasn't anything in the room other than the hotel equipment. No luggage, clothing, or papers. The bed was still made; the pillows virgin. But the bed had been shoved away from the wall a trifle, as if someone had moved it to look beneath it and hadn't quite pushed it back in its place.

Little Hump didn't seem to notice. "What'd I tell you!"

"Told me your father wasn't up here. He was. Now, why was he?" Pedley squinted at the ashtray on the bureau; the glass receptacle had been amateurishly wiped clean. "And why'd you take the trouble to dump out the ashtray?" He bent over the

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wastebasket. "What'd you do with the ashes? Flush 'em down the johnny?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," Little Hump said loftily. "I certainly didn't empty any ashtrays here."

"What kind of cigarettes you smoke?"

"Camels . . . if it makes any difference. If you'd tell me what you're looking for . . . ?"

"Don't know. Expect your father'll know. Expect he thought something had been dropped on the floor that might incriminate you, so he came around after the fire to remove it."

Little Hump groaned. "How wacky can you get! My father had no reason in the world to come up here. He couldn't have gotten in my room anyhow; I'd turned the key in, as I told you." He sauntered toward the bathroom, reached for the doorknob.

"Hold it." Pedley was curt. "Stay put. As you were."

"Any objections if I use the—"

"Yair. Park your pants. On that chair." Pedley went into the bathroom. One hand towel, on a rack beside the bathtub, had been used, but nothing else was out of place. The washbowl was spotless. The wastebasket empty.

He opened the window to the air shaft. A rank stench of burned wood, smoldering cloth, wet plaster, and scorched paint came up from the four floors below.

On the outside of the shallow window ledge, ranged side by side as if they had been counters in a game played at a bar, were seven half-consumed paper matches. He studied the pale yellow stems, the blackened heads, for a full minute. Then he called:

"See if you can get your father on the phone, Tarkk. Ask him to come over right away. It's urgent."

Little Hump hesitated, then used the phone.

Pedley brooded over the matches that the arsonist had used; at least one person had died or been seriously injured for each of those seven. And in his experience, only one sort of firebug used as many matches as this. . . .

"Anna?" said Little Hump. "Is my father . . . what? No! . . . My God! . . . When? . . . Oh, my God! . . . I'll be there just as soon as I can."

Pedley closed the window.

Little Hump called hoarsely. "He's in bed—heart attack—doctor's there now—they think it's very serious. . . ." He came to the bathroom door. "They think he's . . . dying."

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"TOUGH." PEDLEY DIDN'T PUT any sympathy into it. He'd had witnesses before this who'd been suddenly stricken when faced with an appearance before the grand jury. "Your father been under medical care?"

"Dad hasn't been a well man for the last six months." Little Hump appeared genuinely shaken. "I guess the shock of hearing that Vinny . . . well, hell, he was fond of her, too!"

"Fond enough to help you get her back after she'd left you for Estero?"

"Dad never interfered in my . . . uh . . . relations with Vinny." Little Hump was emphatic. "I never asked him to. If I'd asked him, he'd have done what he could. He's been the best father a man could have. I'm not going to stand here talking while he may be dying. I'm going to grab a cab—"

"You're going to wait." Pedley gave his office number to the girl on the hotel switchboard. "Barney? I'm in twelve-twenty-two at the Wrenton."

His office man repeated the number. "Be there a bit, boss? The Commish has been trying to get in touch; he's built up quite a head of pressure."

"What about?"

"This Estero, seems he comes through with a confesh to the cops; big brass wants an explanation, why the Bureau couldn't get anything out of him when we had him in custody first."

"Who says Raff confessed?"

"Cap Stearns, after the smashup, he—"

"Godsake, what smashup!"

"Cap and one of his crew, they were ferrying Estero down to the Crim Courts Building; Sanitation truck kissed 'em into a light pole. Cap and the other Hommy nose-dived into the windshield. Don't know whether their prisoner was hurt or not. Time the amby got there he'd scramoosed."

Pedley grunted. "When was this?"

"No dope, boss. All I know is what I pipelined out of Matty, in the Commissioner's office. He says while Stearns was being wheeled up to the op'rating room, he babbles that Estero'd admitted firebugging the Wrenton."

"Stearns didn't have it down on paper." The Marshal made it a statement.

"S'pose not. But it'll be down on paper in a couple hours,

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when the *Telly* comes out. My pal Steinman, he gives me a buzz to ask if Estero'd done any singing to you."

"What'd you tell him?"

"I kind of hedged, not exactly knowing. Said he better not print the police side until he checked with you, personally."

"Fair enough. Call him back, Barno. Tell him the Bureau expects to make an arrest within twenty-four hours."

"Steinman won't buy that stale salami, boss."

"Slice it good and thick," Pedley said. "Tell him that, in the Bureau's opinion, the fire in the Marville Arms was probably set by the same incendiarist who lit up the Wrenton. That the Marshal has evidence as to where the blaze was started and how. Your *Telly* pal can suggest Estero isn't the bird we're after, but don't let him say I put it that way."

"Okechobee," Barney said. "That'll be enough for him to build up about two columns. What about the Commish?"

"You can't locate me."

"I'm still trying. . . ."

"Yair. Where's Ed?"

"Uptown. Jewelry district. Sniffing around on that Marco Polo pretty."

"When he rings in, ask him to hop over to the Wrenton. I'll leave the key to twelve-twenty-two for him. He'll need his equipment."

"Where'll you be, boss?"

"Over at the residence of J. Humphrey Tarkk, Senior. You have the phone number." He hung up.

Pedley took a sheet of writing paper from the desk drawer. The Marshal wrote:

ED—
Prints in can. Pix of sill. Rush.

BEN

scribbled "Deputy Fire Marshal Edward Shaner" on the envelope. "Let's go see your father, Tarkk."

Out in the hall he locked the door, pasted a sticker across lock and jamb:

CLOSED
By Order of the
FIRE DEPARTMENT
City of New York

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Little Hump didn't speak until, at the elevator, Pedley asked, "Where was that lunchroom you ate in last night? Seventy-ninth, you say?"

"Somewhere along there. Eightieth, maybe."

"Anybody besides the counterman see you in there?"

"Why, I guess so." Little Hump shrugged it off as a matter of no importance. "There were people in there. I don't know whether they'd remember me. Damn if I could remember any of them."

"Didn't talk to anyone?"

"Don't think so. No." Little Hump fidgeted; his attitude suggested annoyance at such trivialities.

In the lobby Pedley wigwagged to the old man in the Towers uniform: "What's your name?"

"Nat Jackson. Call me Jixie, sir."

"Give this to the desk to hold for a Mister Shaner, Jixie." He handed over the envelope with the note and key. "He'll be along in a little while." A quarter changed hands.

"Yessir." Jixie hurried away.

Before Pedley could get Little Hump past the clutter of soggy plaster, soaked carpeting, and steaming upholstery cushions piled near the street door, the bellman scurried back. "You the Fire Marshal? Call for you. Take it at the desk."

"Thanks, Jixie." Pedley caught Little Hump's arm, led him back to the desk. Higgins held out the desk phone.

Shaner's amiable nonchalance came over the line clearly: "Hi, coach. Were you suckled by a soothsayer or was it just that you were brung up by a gypsy in one of those carney outfits?"

"What's eating you?"

"Not a thing, not one thing. You tell me where to go, what to do. I get paid for it. But it would save a lot of skittering to and fro if you'd tip me off to these things."

"Get to it, windy."

"You send me forth to seek the lowdown on this Marco Polo hunk of glitter when you're already on its trail—"

"Makes you think so, Ed?"

"Barney just told me you were on your way over to J. Humphrey Tarkk's."

"So . . . ?"

"Diligent inquiry amongst and around the gem men dredges up the interesting info, which doubtless you already know, that the world's largest unmounted star sapphire has been surrep-

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titiously peddled about for the last week or so by this same J. Humphrey T."

"Senior or Junior?"

"Latter. Scuttlebutt hath it that the Polo wasn't actually for sale; party wished to borrow a paltry twenty-five thousand, leaving the stone as security."

"Who'd touch it on that basis when it was insured by someone else?" Pedley backed against the desk where he could keep an eye on Little Hump.

"The bunch on the grapevine along Jewelry Row agree that the joker aforementioned didn't claim to own the bauble but insisted that if he could make the loan he'd produce a letter of authorization from the lawful possessor. Now tell me you knew naught of the setup."

"All news to me, Ed. Is there more?"

Shaner sighed. "I feel like someone telling how funny a cartoon is, knowing the person I'm telling it to has already seen it in the magazine. Yes, there's this. J. Humphrey—Junior, that is—has been working for Brounham, Mathing, Sussfield and Rhine until a week ago. Then he got fired."

"Why?"

"Far's I can find out, simply for not paying attention to business. All he had to do at the office was show up for a few hours every day, take a customer out to lunch on the house, make himself agreeable. Apparently that was too rugged a row to hoe. Old Sussfield, who runs the office, gave Junior the blue envelope, and Mathing didn't see fit to go over Sussfield's head. Anyhoo, next Monday Junior shows up in the diamond district trying to hock the big rock. So far, nobody's willing to burn their fingers, handling it."

Pedley said, "Don't take any bets on that, Ed."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A LADDERMAN who had been on fire watch in one of the burned-out brownstones trudged back to his hose truck with a ceiling hook; the long pole was crusted with ice. "Hye, Marshal, wanna watch your step if you're goin' in there. Stair risers're burned through. Easy get hurt."

"Thanks; I'm not heading inside." Pedley motioned Little

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Hump to the front seat of the red sedan. "Tarkk, hear what th' fella says? Easy to get hurt, thing like this."

"Think my father's death wouldn't hurt me, goddamn you!" Little Hump slammed the car door. "Dad means more to me than—" He didn't finish.

"Could be he got a spot of smoke poisoning when he was over here last night. Might have affected his heart."

Tarkk stared at the hose truck glumly.

Pedley booted the starter. "How come you didn't see your old man go in the hotel when you were sitting there in your car all the time watching to catch Estero if he came out?"

"I wasn't sitting there all the time."

"Where were you?"

"Downtown. West Fifty-fourth. Club Choucoune. Talking to this fluffie who'd been living with Estero."

"When'd you leave your observation post?" It explains how Pauline Lowee learned where the newlyweds were, anyhow.

"Around half past one. Something like that. I guess I got to the club around quarter to two."

"Anybody see you there? Besides Mrs. Lowee?"

Tarkk looked at him out of the corner of his eyes, startled. "Don't know whether anybody else did or not. What difference it make?"

"Might make some." Pedley got the rig rolling. "Your idea was to get Mrs. Lowee to dash up to the Wrenton, raise a commotion?"

"I wanted her to call Vinny, tell her she wasn't legally married."

"Mrs. Lowee go for that?"

"Not too much." A sharp edge came into Tarkk's voice. "Little bitch said she wouldn't take a chance on interfering; she was afraid of getting into trouble herself, maybe losing her job. Then she was scared witless of this guitarist. Besides, she seemed confident he wouldn't stick with Vinny very long; sooner or later he'd come back to her, most likely sooner. That made me goddamn mad."

"She didn't come back to the hotel with you, then?"

"Said she couldn't leave while there were patrons with coats in the checkroom. Thought she might be able to make it after a while if she could get the manager to take over when there were only a few checks out. But anyway she didn't intend to get mixed up in the mess. So I got sore and went home."

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"Your father still up at that hour?"

"Sure. It was only half past two or so. Dad knew about the elopement. He was anxious to learn whether I'd been able to talk some sense into Vinny; he was badly upset when he found out I hadn't."

The car slid into the park. "So you were home when the fire started?"

"I haven't any idea when it started, so I can't tell you where I was at the time. I expect I was on my way to Scarsdale to see if I could get Mrs. Rengist to go to the hotel and make one last plea, herself."

"Girl's mother go along with that?"

"After a while, she did."

"Don't have much luck persuading people, do you?"

"Hell, she was dead to the world when I got there. She'd been nipping along all afternoon and evening after she'd discovered Vinny'd run away. Time I got to Scarsdale, Mrs. Rengist was out cold. I had to wait there in the living room while Magda tried to get some black coffee into her. Can't tell how long I sweated it out, waiting for her, one hell of a long time. She'd just come downstairs—old lush wasn't more'n halfway sober even then—when the *Times* called with the news Vinny'd been . . . burned to death."

Pedley let the inaccuracy pass.

A black coupé with the physician's cross beside the license plate stood in front of Sixty-seven East Seventy-ninth.

"Doc Telfer's still here." Tarkk was out of the car before Pedley cut the switch.

But the Marshal moved swiftly, too. He was at the younger man's elbow when the Puerto Rican maid opened the door of the Tarkk apartment.

"Oh!" Her black eyes were full of pity. "I so wish you could come before, Mist' Humphrey."

"Is he worse?" Little Hump threw off his overcoat, ignoring the Marshal.

"He is very sick," she shook her head. "Very bad . . ."

Pedley caught the son's arm. "I'm going in to talk to your father first."

Blood surged into Little Hump's face. "Goddamn it, I've a right—"

"Not yet. You wait. I'm on Fire Department business."

"But you can't keep me from—"

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"I can. Don't buck me or maybe you won't get to see him at all."

A small, dapper man with a full spade beard came into the living room. "Ah, Humphrey . . ."

"How is he, doc?"

"Much too ill to see anyone, my boy." The physician glanced at Pedley.

The Marshal said, "Sorry to have to contradict you, Doctor Telfer. But I'm from the Fire Department. I'll have to ask your patient a few—"

"Impossible! I forbid it! Absolutely!" The beard tilted up defiantly. "The slightest excitement . . ." He let the words hang in the air, ominously.

"Can't guarantee not to excite him. But I'm going to see him." Pedley held up his palm to prevent interruption. "I understand; your patient's life may be at stake. So are other lives."

The doctor scowled. "I . . . will . . . not . . . permit . . . you—"

Pedley put up a hand. "You're welcome to come along, Doctor. Tarkk, you stay out of it, or I'll put you where you'll have to." He followed the reluctant physician into a bedroom furnished with an old-fashioned double bed with an immense carved-walnut headboard.

The features on the pillow weren't as florid as he remembered seeing them earlier in the day; the white mustaches lay drearily limp. But the blue eyes of the man on the bed were clear and alert.

"This man"—the doctor glowered—"insists he must ask you a few questions, Jerome."

The older man's head made a slight movement of assent.

Pedley hunkered down close beside the grotesquerie of the headboard. "I'm from the Fire Department, Mister Tarkk. When I was over at the Wrenton Towers investigating that blaze early this morning I saw you come out of the hotel. Right?"

Again the almost imperceptible movement of assent.

"You'd been up in room twelve-twenty-two, correct?"

"Quite so." The lips beneath the heavy white mustache scarcely moved; the voice was barely a whisper.

"How'd you get the key to that room?"

"Why," the whisper came slowly, "I simply went to the desk and asked for the key, and they gave it to me."

"Yair? Why'd you go to the room your son had been in? To look for something he'd mislaid?"

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"Exactly." The blue eyes blinked slowly. "Quite so."

"Something that would implicate him in the setting of the fire?"

"Oh, no." The head rolled feebly from side to side. "Not at all. My son had nothing to do with the fire. He had lost a valuable piece of jewelry, a piece which had been—" A spasm contorted the bulbous politician-like features but the whisper went on, "had been entrusted to him. . . ." He gasped, closed his eyes.

The doctor whipped out a small ampoule, crushed it, held it beneath the sick man's nostrils. "Can't you see," he glared at Pedley, "what you've done?"

The Marshal put his mouth closer to the ear on the pillow. "What was this piece of jewelry? A sapphire?"

The gasps became less violent. "Quite . . . kah! . . . Quite so, sir. Kah, kah! . . . A sapphire earring . . ."

A look of startled horror came onto the bulbous face. The blue eyes opened wide. Both of J. Humphrey Senior's hands clutched at his chest.

The doctor smothered an exclamation, pushed Pedley aside. "Have you no mercy, sir? This man is dying!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MAN on the bed struggled to sit up, made it halfway by propping his left elbow against the monstrous headboard. Sweat shone on his forehead. "You may be right, doctor." He made a try at a smile, baring his teeth like an animal. "But not . . . not until . . . I've set . . . this gentleman . . . straight." He waved away a second ampoule. "About . . . my son."

A pen appeared in Pedley's hand. "If this is an *in extremis* statement"—he looked at the physician—"I'll take it down."

The doctor mumbled beneath his breath, threw up his hands, strode to a window, stood with his back to the bed.

"*Extremis* or no"—Tarkk, Senior, fought for breath—"it's the truth." He sank back on the pillow, his eyes closed. "My son made a bad mistake." He got the words out in a wheezy rush, pausing between sentences. "He made it for my sake . . . because I have had difficulties . . . serious financial difficulties . . . since my defeat in the proxy fight. . . . So Humphrey borrowed . . . from his fiancée." He waggled his head feebly. "Bad . . ."

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The doctor came back from the window. "If you're going to keep on disregarding my orders, Jerome, I have to wash my hands of your case."

"Another minute," the sick man whispered. "That's enough for what I have to say. . . ." His eyelids fluttered, as if pacing the hurried words. "When the girl eloped . . . with this Mexican boy . . . Humphrey had an obligation . . . to return the jewelry . . . which she'd loaned him . . . so he could borrow on them." A vein-purpled hand moved in futile emphasis. "He did not have the money . . . to redeem them . . . but I told him . . . he must send back . . . anything of hers . . . he still had . . . in his possession."

Pedley kept his pen moving. "He still had those sapphire earrings?"

"This is needless cruelty, sir." The doctor glared.

"He had the earrings." The whisper was scarcely audible. "He meant to use their return . . . to get to talk to Vinny . . . but it didn't work. . . . And somehow he lost one . . . in the hotel. . . . He telephoned to me . . . I took it on myself . . . to go over and search for it . . . without success." The veined hand clawed at his chest in another paroxysm. "That is . . . the truth." The hand flopped limply on the bedspread.

The doctor whipped a hypodermic out of his satchel. "I think you have done as much damage as you can, sir!"

Pedley watched the deft fingers making an injection. "My work's something like an exploratory operation, doctor. Never know how deep I'll have to cut or what I'll find. Still sometimes it's absolutely necessary." He put his hand on the physician's shoulder. "You don't like to see a patient suffering pain you can't prevent, I suppose. That's about the way I feel in a case like this."

However much of a playboy and a ne'er-do-well Junior might be to others, the Marshal reflected, clearly he was still a pretty swell guy to his old man. . . .

When Pedley went out, Humphrey, Junior, was sitting on a footstool in the living room, head between his knees, hands over his face. "Far's I'm concerned, you can go in to see your father now. Up to the doc."

Humphrey stalked into the bedroom, closed the door.

The maid sidled in. "He is bad, no?"

"Not good." Pedley shook his head. "When was he taken sick?"

"I find him here"—she pointed to the Gay Nineties couch—"when I let myself in at seven, yes. Mister Humphrey, he not

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home. I throw water on Mister Jerome, finally he tell me the number to telephone for the doctor."

"Mister Humphrey often away when you come to work in the morning?"

She laid her head over against her right shoulder. "You no find out nothing from me, mister."

He sighed. "That's all right. I know about Mister Humphrey's staying out habits." He picked up the phone, called the Wrenton, asked for 1222.

Shaner answered: "Room Service. Your order plea-uz."

"Save the snappy cracks, Ed. Got those pix?"

"As per specification. Aught else?"

"Run 'em downtown. Put 'em in the mill. Then scoot up to the Marville Arms, camp out in the lobby. The Lowee babe is doing nip-ups because of that gas explosion. Thinks Estero is trying to fix her up with a headstone."

"How long a camp-out will this be, coach?"

"Until relieved. All day, likely."

"Ah, now. Fun is fun. You realize I didn't get my pillow-drill quota?"

"Go to sleep on that plant, I'll drill you with something heavier than a pillow. Hear?"

"Regretfully, yowzah. If you're not in too great a swivet, I can throw you the inside and lowdown on Clarence Mathing, Esquire."

"Throw it fast."

"He's real far out, is Clarence. Bluing for Blood. Old Hudson Valley estate. High Church. Heavy-doing Society. Speaks only to Cabots and so forth. Important Connections. President of this, Treasurer of that. On more boards than Johnson's Wax. Well thought of in the Field of Fancy Finance. Well liked in his own company. Fifty-seven. Bachelor. *Bon vivant.* Not exactly the sort who'd be expected to buddy up to the late Mike-the-Beezark Rengist, hah?"

"Politics not the only thing makes strange bedfellows."

"So Kinsey says. Well. Mike-the-Beezark, Sultan of the Stevedores and Plug-Ugly of the Piers, was closer than a brother to Clarence. Since Mike checked out, nine, ten years ago, Mathing's practically been a father to Mike's daughter. By the way, I pick up a small item about this late luscious."

"Such as—?"

"She was a brainy babe, Phi Beta at Smith last June. This in

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addition to the looks. Now in her café-jazziety set, a rep as a smart cookie is looked on as a crippling handicap. So to show she didn't intend to remain strictly on the intellectual plane, she and Little Hump went pajama-partying around together all last summer."

Pedley thought of the beach snapshot with the man's figure cut out. "It still doesn't figure she'd have opened her bedroom door for him on the night she'd married another guy."

Little Hump came out of his father's bedroom. He looked tired.

Pedley said, "Hop to it now, Ed," and hung up.

Little Hump scowled, wearily. "You still here? Aren't you content with badgering my father practically into his grave? What else do you want of us!"

"One thing I want's the mate to that earring you lost."

Little Hump stuck out his jaw. "No. That's not what you want. You want to cover up for that son of a bitch. You helped him get out of jail. You told the judge you thought he was cured. You're not man enough to admit you were wrong. You'd like to make me a fall guy so nobody'll stop to think what a thickhead you are for letting Estero out of jail."

"The earring?" Pedley said quietly.

"I haven't got it," Little Hump answered tautly. "I gave it back to Vinny's mother."

"What made you think you lost the other one at the Wrenton?"

"I had them with me, meant to give 'em back to Vinny. Must have dropped one somewhere."

Pedley held out the one he'd found.

Little Hump's eyes bulged. His breathing was loud in the quiet apartment. "Where'd you get that?"

"In room eight-twenty-two early this morning."

"You're a liar!"

"Under the dead girl. So you were in her room."

Little Hump bit off the words, "I hope Christ strikes me dead this minute if I was ever in the Starrs' room."

The phone jangled. The maid answered. She peered anxiously at the Marshal. "It's for a Mister Pedley. You, yes?"

"Yair." He took the receiver. "Hello."

"Ben, this is Monaghan."

"Just thinking about you, Commissioner."

"Were you so! I've been trying to get hold of you for the last two hours."

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"Just heard that from my office. I've been chasing around a bit."

"I'm being chased around, Ben! By the Mayor, the Prosecutor's office, and a dozen newspapermen!" The Commissioner was sardonic. "We have to make some kind of statement to the press about this Estero; how you happened to recommend his release, why you weren't able to get any admission of guilt out of him before you turned him over to the police. I can't see how you can get your Bureau off the hook, Ben, but by God you'd better put the Fire Department in the clear. I'll give you till tomorrow at nine. Otherwise, I'll have to call in your badge."

"I understand," Pedley said dryly. "Maybe I can work out a statement that'll ease the pressure. Got someone right here with me who'll help; I'll bring him along so you can talk to him after he makes his deposition. Be right down, Commissioner." He hung up before Monaghan could make any retort.

Little Hump snarled, "You think you're going to get me to leave this house when my father's dying, you bastard?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BARNEY LAID THE FINGERPRINT reports on the Marshal's desk. "It's half past one. You want me to get you a sandwich?"

Pedley shook a Benzedrine out of a prescription box. "This'll do. Can't afford to sleep much, next eighteen hours. We have a deadline."

"The Commish?"

"Yair. Wants us to get this Wrenton thing cleared up by nine A.M. or else."

"Else what?"

"You'll have a new boss."

"Ah, that mush-puss may not know much about fire fighting but he's got more sense'n to remove the best chief we ever—"

"He can't help himself, Barno. The Hall's bearing down on him. They want action; all the action Monaghan can think of is crucifying Raff Estero."

"I know you don't think he set that blaze." Barney looked troubled. "But why'd he lam off like that after that smackup in the cop car?"

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"He wanted to see his wife gets a good casket and a first-class funeral. Might be he aims to take a pot shot at the person he thinks killed her." Pedley fingered the livid slash of scar tissue along the left side of his jaw, a memento of the fire that had permanently crippled Barney. "A psych doc might claim Estero's lost some of his marbles, but what he's lost is a girl he thought a lot of."

"Then why'd he leave her on his weddin' night to go hunt for a corned beef on rye? Why didn't he send a bellboy out?"

"Probably the sandwiches were just an excuse. Chances are he knew his gal wanted to break the news of the marriage to her mother while he wasn't around."

"He never did tell you where he went to get this midnight repast or how long it took or what he did with the sandwiches he was supposed to have brought back."

"Those things didn't seem important to him, Barn. They would have, if he'd been lying in order to set up an alibi. Since he wasn't, it never occurred to him to explain about 'em." Pedley laid his right hand on the desk, palm uppermost. "Comes down to this: either the kid's a pathological murderer or he's the victim of the lousiest frame-up on record." The Marshal studied the lab sheets. "Which are Tarkk's prints?"

"Ones marked *F*. There on the second page. Ones from room twelve-twenty-two."

" 'Knob of bathroom door,' " Pedley read aloud.

"None of his from eight-twenty-two," Barney said.

"No. Only ones found in both rooms were the *B*'s. Couple from the bridal room, bathroom rather, one on inside of the twelve-twenty-two door to corridor."

"Might be one of the bellhops."

Pedley stuffed the reports in his coat pocket. "Maybe I'll begin seeing things that aren't there, Barnabus. At that, it might help. See if you can get the Tarkk house on the phone. I'll talk to the doc, if he's still there."

Five minutes later he walked into the deposition room, a small office equipped only with a table, two chairs, a stenographic desk, and a tape recorder on a typewriter stand. Little Hump sat tilted back against the wall in one of the straight-backed chairs, smoking sullenly; he let the front legs of the chair down suddenly.

"Can I go home now?" He started up.

"Not yet. I just talked to your doctor. Your father's resting easily; they'd thought of ordering in an oxygen tent, but appar-

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ently that's not going to be necessary. You don't have to fret too much about him; as soon as I left he seemed to make a pretty good recovery."

"I don't believe you!"

"We'll let you talk to the house after a while so you can draw your own conclusions." Pedley switched on the tape recorder. "Before we get around to that, there are a couple of things you didn't cover in your deposition."

"I answered all your goddamn questions!"

"These are ones I just thought up. I do that, every so often." Pedley sat down opposite his prisoner. "Now you say you were out at the Rengist home last night, sort of waiting up with Mrs. Rengist to hear from Lavinia."

"I was."

"So you were on pretty good terms with Mrs. Rengist. How does that happen when you just got fired by the firm that handles her investments?"

"What difference do you think that made to her!" Little Hump was contemptuous. "She doesn't like old Sussfield any better than I did. Matter of fact, she got so mad about my getting the bounce that she gave Mister Mathing the rough edge of her tongue and promised to let me handle part of her reinvestment account if it would help me to get another connection down in the Street."

"She still considered you as a prospective son-in-law, even after the elopement?"

"We didn't discuss that. She knew I was sore about this half-breed git-tar whanger; she was, too . . . and we were both worried about Vinny."

Pedley said, "Um."

"You'll find out it's all just as I said. If you don't want anything more from me . . . ?"

"We might, we might. So we're going to keep you in custody, at least for tonight."

Little Hump raged to his feet. "You have to let me call my lawyer before you slap me in the jug, you—"

"Tut," said Pedley, "and tut. We're not jugging you. Merely detaining you. As a material witness. And you're not going to jail."

Tarkk's eyes asked the question, fearfully.

"Usually," the Marshal said pleasantly, "we keep our witnesses in some good hotel. In your case, I'm sure you won't mind

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staying in the Wrenton Towers. Your room is still reserved in your name there. I'll be back later, take you up there."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE OFFICES of Brounham, Mathing, Sussfield and Rhine had evidently been furnished back in the early twenties, Pedley decided, looking around the reception room.

Pedley was ushered into the old-fashioned private office; Clarence Mathing seemed to weigh anxiously every word the Marshal said. The reason for his concern came to light when Mathing inquired:

"Have you seen what the newspapers are saying, my dear sir?"

"About the fire's having been set?" Pedley wondered at the man's evident agitation.

"No, no." Mathing tapped a little pile of clippings that lay beside his *Poor's Manual*. "You told me this morning it was incendiary; I'm sure you know your business. I was referring to what they're saying about this Tarkk boy—that he's been arrested and will be charged with all sorts of unmentioned crimes."

"He hasn't been charged with anything, yet." Pedley lounged comfortably in an ancient leather club chair.

Mathing fished among his clippings. "Here . . . this paper suggests possible rape, assault, murder, and arson. I've had occasion to learn considerable about Humphrey, Junior. I find it impossible to entertain any belief that he might have done a single one of those things. Not a single one."

"You weren't entirely satisfied with him as an employee, though?"

"My stars, no. I was not." Mathing shook his head. "But it's a far cry from not believing him to be an asset to the firm to supposing he might have committed a crime of violence. I tell you, sir, I don't believe it. He has his faults, but they're not such as to lend credence to fantastic charges like these."

"Why'd you let him go?" Pedley said.

"Our bonding company advised it. All our people are bonded, you see. Handling negotiable securities all the time. They make periodic checkups on all risks, I understand. When they looked

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into Humphrey, Junior, they concluded he was living too fast for his rather limited income."

"Mind letting me have a copy of their report on him?"

"Not at all." Mathing pressed a button; the spinsterish secretary who had ushered Pedley in appeared. "Bring me the Globe Indemnity report on Humphrey Tarkk, if you please." He turned back to the Marshal. "Nothing very damaging in it. No kept women, no excessive gambling. Matter of fact, worst thing was, he was indirectly borrowing money from a client; to be exact, from a client's daughter. That Lavinia Rengist might have urged the loan of some jewels on him is quite possible . . . but it's extremely bad practice in an investment house."

The secretary returned with a Manila folder. "There's a copy of Mister Sussfield's memorandum to you in here, too, Mister Mathing," she said.

"Ah . . . well . . . um . . ." He handed the folder to Pedley. "You may as well see it all, sir. I'm afraid the young man became impudent . . . um . . . possibly insolent is a more accurate term, when he learned he was to receive his severance pay. As you will see, he told Charley Sussfield that he'd still be handling Mrs. Rengist's funds, whether or not they came through our firm. A rather rude manner of notifying my partner that young Humphrey meant to use his influence with Zelma to take the business away from us."

Pedley scanned the bonding-company report. "How come he had so much influence with the mother after the girl had given him the frost?"

Mathing coughed in polite deprecation. "Zelma is something of a snob, socially speaking, and she did want her daughter to have an assured social position."

Pedley said, "Marriage into the Tarkk family would have set that up, hah?"

"Quite. It's a fine old name. Humphrey's father is a splendid fellow. And I must say the boy is most likable, genuinely attractive. It's too bad—it should have worked out nicely. . . ."

"Mother liked him, but young Tarkk wasn't so attractive to the daughter?"

"We-ell . . ." Mathing was cautious. "I'm not prepared to say that. Lavinia did like him, too. She . . . um . . . went around with him quite a good deal last summer. Last fall she let Zelma announce the engagement. Yes, I'd say she was genuinely fond of Humphrey . . . until this Mexican boy came into the picture."

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"No social background there."

"None at all. But you have to understand that Lavinia herself had none of the debutante's usual social aspirations. She was a remarkably intelligent girl, Marshall, remarkably independent in her thinking. And courageous . . . yes, courageous. She knew her mother wouldn't accept Estero, that few of her friends would. She wasn't deceiving herself about his future, either . . . she knew he probably wouldn't ever make enough to allow them to live on his earnings. Yet she had character enough to go ahead and marry Estero anyhow."

"You don't think it was simply a quickie boy-meets-girl thing?"

"No, I do not." Mathing looked embarrassed. "I don't know quite how to make it clear. I'm quite sure, from what I know of Lavinia, that if it had been merely an infatuation, she'd have gone away somewhere with this Estero boy for a week or a weekend . . . and gotten over it. She was strong-willed about such matters—quite a few of our modern girls are, I'm told. But she wouldn't have gone through this marriage ceremony unless she was deeply in love with the boy; of that I'm quite positive."

"What about Estero? You figure he was just out to latch onto her money?"

"My stars, no!" Mathing was surprised. "From the little I've heard, she was the one who made most of the advances. It would have taken a very unimpressionable young man to have resisted Lavinia when she went after him. I only saw them together once, briefly, but . . . no, I'd doubt there was any fortune hunting on his part."

The phone purred softly. He picked it up. "Yes? . . . Um . . . Well . . . put him on." His forehead became ridged with concentration: "Yes, this is Mathing. . . . Oh, yes. . . . Why, I believe it's to be at Greenhaven Cemetery in Scarsdale tomorrow afternoon at three. . . ." He clapped his hand over the mouthpiece, whispered, "Estero," to Pedley.

The Marshal sprang for the door to the secretary's room, wrenched it open. There was no one at the typewriter desk. The spinster wasn't around. He snatched up her phone.

Mathing's voice came over the line: "You cut me off, operator, you cut me off!"

The switchboard girl was apologetic:

"I'm sorry, Mister Mathing. That party disconnected."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

PEDLEY WENT BACK into Mathing's office. "He hung up on you?"

Mathing frowned. "Didn't even say thank you for telling him when the funeral was. I'd hoped to keep him talking so you could trace the call."

"That's all he wanted to know? When she's to be buried?"

"Yes. It wasn't wrong of me to tell him that, was it?"

"No. They'll pick him up at the cemetery tomorrow afternoon, if we don't get him before then."

"I wish you success, sir. Anything I can do to help . . ." Mathing waved good-by.

Pedley headed the red sedan uptown. It was only a little after three, but the skies were dull aluminum, the air felt like snow again, and it was already twilight. The Benzedrine was beginning to hammer at his temples. Barney was right about the Benzies: sooner or later they'd get to you, make you see things that weren't there. As he was, now.

What he was seeing was the key to 822, lying there on the carpet near the bureau. It shouldn't have been there; the boys from the ladder company had been forced to use the lock breaker to get in that room. So the door had been locked when the fire broke out. Yet there had been someone in 822 with the girl. Someone who'd gone out and locked the door from the outside. How had the key gotten back inside the room?

Maybe the party who'd gotten into the bridal room had simply gone to the desk down in the lobby and asked for the 822 key. Tarkk, Senior, said he'd done that, to get the 1222 key. They hadn't been very particular about handing out room keys to anyone who stepped up and asked for them. Young Tarkk might have tried that in desperation and could have gotten away with it. If he'd surprised the bride in bed, the rest might have followed naturally—the assault, the blow, the panicky fear of being suspected as a murderer, the set fire.

Then there was Estero. If the girl had been asleep with the door locked, he could have gotten the duplicate key at the desk . . . and again, the rest might have followed—if the kid was a heartless killer. And that he couldn't bring himself to believe.

The red sedan moved slowly across East 116th Street.

The police would have been here already. Likely they'd have a plain-clothes detective posted before the tenement. Yair, there

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he was, by that candy-store doorway, trying to hide behind a newspaper and looking about as inconspicuous as a walrus in a swimming pool.

They haven't picked Raff up yet, then. If you can get hold of him first, maybe you can find out what you need to know.

Pedley drove to the end of the block, turned up the avenue, parked between 117th and 118th, walked back.

He knew the neighborhood as well as the men in the firehouse down the street; he'd worried about this firetrap part of Harlem block by block, ever since he'd been in the Bureau. Nor was he a stranger to the five-story tenement in which the Esteros lived; he'd visited it many times during his investigation of the grammar-school fire.

Pedley climbed to the top floor, knocked on the door with the white enameled letters 4-D. He didn't expect an answer; there wasn't any. But he rapped again, called, "Terry," loudly.

A bolt clicked back. Dark eyes flashed beneath a crown of satiny black hair. "What you want?"

"I want to help your brother, Terry." He pushed in past her, gently.

"He is not here." Teresa Estero was a couple of years younger than her brother; she had Raff's classical good looks and, Pedley remembered, more than a little of his tinderbox temperament.

"I do not know where he is."

"But I think I'll stick around a while, see if he shows up."

There was a banging at the tenement door.

Terry whirled, raced to it.

Pedley caught her as she reached for the knob.

She cried out, "You're hurting me!" fighting to keep him from the door.

He held her off, wrenched the door open, expecting to find the hallway empty; if her brother had been out there she'd given him a full ten seconds' warning. But the knocker was still there, startled by what he'd heard.

He was a thin, gray-uniformed, white-haired Negro of middle age; his forehead was furrowed by uncertainty.

"I got a special delivery," he squinted at Teresa, shifted his puzzled gaze to Pedley. "For a Mister Estero. But—"

Pedley put out his hand. "I'll take it."

Terry screamed, "Don't give it to him! He's not my brother! He hasn't any right to that letter!"

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But the postman had. Pedley glanced at the printed address: *RAFFAEL ESTERO, 267 W. 116 STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.* There was a metallic hardness inside the envelope. "Sign the man's book, Terry."

She glared pure hatred but she did as she was told.

Pedley fingered the object inside the envelope. "Feels like a key," he said. "Who'd be sending your brother a key, special delivery?"

She snatched at the envelope. He held onto one end of it. The envelope tore.

"Now see what you did!" He let the key slide out on the palm of his other hand. On it was stamped:

If found please drop
in any mailbox
1-4-2-8
Terminal Locker Company
Grand Central Terminal
New York City

She wailed, "You made me tear that on purpose."

He tossed the key to her, pulled out the sheet of paper that had enclosed it; it was blank. "You ought to thank me, Terry. This key might have put your brother in the electric chair, if it means what I think it does." He passed the envelope and blank sheet to her. "I think somebody's planted a bunch of stolen rocks in a locker, hoping your brother'll go get 'em and they'll be found on him. My being here when it arrived may be the best break Raff's ever had." But he wondered, as he said it, how the sender of the key had doped out that Raff might have been here to receive it. The envelope had been postmarked from the Grand Central Terminal substation at eight that morning, but it might have been mailed a few hours earlier, at any time after the Wrenton Towers fire broke out.

Terry said, "You are like all officers. Once a person has done wrong, after that he cannot ever go straight. You want my brother back in prison." Her glance flashed to the front bedroom, the one Pedley had peered into earlier, but flicked back instantly to the Marshal. "If I were a man, I would see to it that Raff suffered no more at your hands, you may be sure of that."

"You're not helping him any by—" Pedley lunged for the bed-

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room. A shadow moved more swiftly than a shadow should; a blunt finger rammed into his ribs.

"Easy," Raff said softly. "Don't make me, Mister Pedley. Take it easy. I don't want to use this popper."

"Raff!" Terry quivered. "The special delivery that mailman brought it! It had this key in it. He—" she pointed at Pedley —"made me tear the letter open, so he could see the key. I couldn't help it."

Estero came out from behind the bedroom door; the feeble light from the kitchen showed bluish jowls and haggard circles beneath his eyes. "What's with this key?" He scowled savagely.

Pedley saw that the gun Estero held loosely was a .38 Police Positive, a cop revolver. He probably took that gun off Stearns at the time of the wreck. And the only thing worse than shooting a policeman is stealing his pistol!

Estero repeated, "What's with this key?"

Pedley waved his hand. "I'd guess it's the open sesame to a quarter-million dollars' worth of Rengist glitter in a Grand Central locker. Somebody's hoping you'll go and collect it."

Raff's lips tightened against his teeth. "Who sent it to me?"

"I wouldn't be able to tell you," Pedley said. "Any more than I can tell you how the person who mailed you the key could be sure you'd be around here to get it."

"He wasn't," Raff said. "He couldn't have been. I didn't know I was coming here myself, until I realized I didn't have any dark overcoat to go to—" his voice trembled—"to go to the cemetery in. My old black one's here, that's why I had to come get it! If I could've gotten in touch with you by phone, Terry. . . ."

She dived into the closet. "You could have called the candy store. . . ." She emerged with a black topcoat, its velvet lapels nap-worn.

"I knew they'd have Munio's watched." He waggled the gun. "You better sit on the floor, Marshal. Make me nervous, watching for a chance to grab this gun."

"I make you nervous, you damn fool!" Pedley moved toward him truculently. "Here I've been sweating blood trying to find some way of keeping you out of the frying pan, while you're stampeding around to the Lowee girl's apartment and touching off—"

"Goddamn lie! Haven't been near the Marville! Wouldn't get within a mile of her if my life—*stand still!*" Raff brought the muzzle up on a line with the middle button of the Marshal's coat.

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"Cut it, Marshal! I don't want to have to shoot!"

Pedley kept on. "You won't, boy . . . because if you did you'd never get to Greenhaven Cemetery tomorrow afternoon."

"Come any closer and I'll have to push the button on you!"

Pedley took another step forward. "Drop me," he said quietly, "and you lose just about the only chance you've got of letting folks know you didn't kill your wife."

The Mexican's face was convulsed with torment. "I don't care! I don't care what happens to me! I'm not going to let anyone take me in until—"

Pedley jammed the heel of his hand suddenly at the muzzle only inches away. The impact drove the gun back into Estero's palm just enough to relax the pressure of his finger on the trigger for a split second. Before his reflexes could react, the Marshal had hold of the barrel, was angling it aside.

Estero fought silently to retain the gun.

Pedley wrested it away, felt a sharp pricking at the nape of his neck, heard Terry's voice close to his ear:

"Maybe Raff hasn't the nerve to do it, but I have! You will feel more of this knife if you do not let go of the revolver and sit on the floor now, quickly!"

The knife point jabbed painfully. Pedley tossed the gun on the bed, but stayed on his feet.

Raff seized the gun. "Hold it, Terry."

"Down on the floor." Terry moaned, as if she were the one being hurt.

Pedley turned to face her, slowly, so the edge of the blade touched the side of his throat. "Ask your brother if he wants to have me slashed up, Terry."

Raff said hoarsely. "Cut it out, sis. I've got the popper. Put that damn knife away. And let me have that special delivery!"

Raff made a face over the hand-printed address. "What gave you the idea Vinny's jewels're parked in this locker, Marshal?"

"I'm just enough of a sap to believe you when you say you didn't bonfire your honeymoon hotel." Pedley rubbed his neck where a hot trickle of blood ran down to his shirt collar. "But sure's hell somebody's trying to make it look as if you had. One of the best ways to do that would be to fix it so you'd be found with that jewel box on you." He mopped at his neck with a handkerchief. "Easy to see if I'm right. Go down, look in the locker. If you can get close to it before a couple of Cap Stearn's boys close in on you."

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"They'll have been tipped off to watch it, yeah." Raff tossed the key back to Terry. "You're probably right; it's a trap. I wouldn't have fallen into it anyhow, though. I have other things to take care of."

"Your wife know your sister's address here?" Pedley kept his eyes on Terry, still gripping the knife fiercely.

"No." Raff kept the gun on the Marshal while sliding one arm out of his topcoat. "She knew sis was keeping house in Harlem since Ma died, knew about Inez and Tonio . . . but I never brought her around here."

"Who did know this address?" Pedley asked.

"Pauline." Raff switched the gun to his left hand, slipped out of the light-colored coat. "She came here hunting for me, couple weeks ago."

Terry brandished the knife. "I hate that woman!"

Pedley looked at the smear of blood on the handkerchief. "Think she might have told Little Hump?"

Raff climbed part way into the dark overcoat. "Why should she?"

"Little Hump went to the Choucoune last night to get her to see if she could break things up by calling your wife at the hotel."

"Ahrr!" Raff made an animal noise deep in his throat. "Pauline might've told that yuk where I used to live; she'd do anything to make trouble for me. But what would've been the sense of her mentioning it?"

"Could be Mrs. Lowee suggested the frame-up."

"That bastard Tarkk wouldn't need anyone to suggest it to him." Raff changed hands with the gun, shrugged into the other sleeve. "He'd have thought of a frame before anyone else."

Raff said, "Listen, Marshal. You been decent to me; I'll tell you why I know it was Tarkk who killed Vinny."

Pedley said, "Don't go off half-cocked, Raff. Let the law handle it. I'll be honest; I'm not at all sure it was Little Hump."

"I am," Raff said grimly. "Because Vinny told me herself that she'd been . . . sleeping around with him all last summer and that he'd told her if she ever left him for someone else, he'd murder her."

"Maybe he meant to. Not the same thing as proving he did."

"I'll prove it. I'll get him to confess, if I have to half kill him to do it." He hefted the gun significantly. "Then, by Jesus, I'll

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finish the other half of the job!" Raff raised his voice. "See you later, sis."

Pedley said, "You're going to blow yourself right to hell with that thirty-eight, kid."

"If I do, I'll have company on the trip." Raff showed the nice even teeth without smiling. "I'll take your word you won't try to raise any stink for ten minutes, Marshal."

Pedley said, "All right. You have it. Ten minutes." He looked at his watch. "Five minutes to four."

Terry protested. "Don't trust him, Raff. He'll double-cross you the second you're out that window!"

Raff shook his head. "I don't think so, sis." He put out his hand, squeezed her shoulder. "Be good to Tonio and Inez." He went to the window, crouched, peered through the fresh curtains. "Close that door, so no light'll shine through here, Terry."

She shut the bedroom door, faced Pedley with open hostility. "If you make one move before that ten minutes is up, I'll scream for help; I'll holler you were attacking me."

He rubbed his neck thoughtfully. "I believe you, Terry. One of the things that makes me think Raff can't be as bad as the newspapers say is that you're so loyal to him. You wouldn't be if you thought he'd set fire to a couple of buildings this morning, would you?"

She sniffed. "I know he didn't. You know it, too. Why do you have to keep hounding him!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Fifteen minutes later he was looking for Shaner in the lobby of the Marville Arms. His deputy wasn't around. There was no one behind the switchboard. Estero could have walked in and sneaked upstairs unnoticed, the Marshal thought, as he used the automatic elevator.

There was no need to ring the bell at 4-C. The door was ajar.

Pedley heard a man's voice in the apartment, a strange voice. He went in fast.

Ollie lay on the sofa, a man bending over her, holding her wrist. She was pale and perspiring, the ordinarily trim hair was disheveled. She opened her eyes weakly, murmured "Ben."

"What's wrong?" Pedley went to her.

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Ollie moved her head to glance up at the man leaning over her. "My boss, doc. You tell him . . ."

The physician kept his eyes on the dial of his watch until the pulse-counting was completed. "We've a couple of cases of poisoning here, sir. I can't say a great deal more until I've made my report to the police."

"You can, to me. What was it?" Pedley smoothed back the hair from Ollie's forehead.

"Phosphorous compounds. That is to say—match heads." The physician seemed hesitant.

"Godsake! Patient doing all right?"

"This one is." Olive reached up to touch his hand. "I only had a touch of it, Ben, Pauline was . . . terribly sick."

"She still is," the doctor said. "If it hadn't been for this young woman's use of mustard in warm water, I'm afraid we'd have lost the one in the other room." He turned toward the bedroom as the door opened and Shaner came out.

The deputy was in shirt sleeves; he held a white-enameled basin. "Hi, coach. Wondered when you'd join the party. Care for a phosphorus old-fashioned? Stomach-pump chaser?"

Pedley looked in at Pauline Lowee; she was on her stomach with her head hanging down over the edge of the bed, her hair trailing damply to the carpet. The bedroom stank of vomit. "Suicide try?"

Ed said, cheerfully. "She nearly made it the hard way . . ."

Pedley came back to the sofa. "Hate to make you talk now, Ollie . . . but I have to know what happened."

Ollie attempted a smile; it didn't jell. "She wanted a cup of tea. I went into the kitchen with her. Watched her while she boiled the water. Stood right behind her when she poured it over the bags in a little Japanesy teapot. Thought I'd had my eyes on her every single second." She paused, breathing in little straining gasps. . . .

Ollie went on: "She poured a cup of tea. Drank it right in front of me. As calmly as if she'd been at a party, Ben. She set that cup down on the coffee table right there. Left me to go to the bathroom. It wasn't half a minute before I heard her retching up her insides."

Pedley picked up the empty cup, sniffed. "How'd you happen to drink any of this stuff?"

"I took a sip, just a sip, to make sure that whatever she's taken was in the tea, Ben. Of course it had been."

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"Oh, fine!" Pedley grimaced.

"So then I knew. I rang the switchboard down in the lobby and asked the Negro to hustle Ed up here, then to call the nearest doctor he knew, get him here on the double."

"Soon's Ed came we got her in on the bed. I looked in the frigidaire for eggs; I remembered from my First Aid course at the Fire School that egg whites were an antidote for matchhead poisoning. There weren't any eggs, but Ed said dry mustard mixed in warm water would be just as good. It was Ed who saved her, really, Ben."

"He gets a couple days off for that. I hope he made you take some right away."

She did smile then. "We both forgot it, we were so busy getting some of the stuff into her. Nobody but myself to blame."

"That's my line," Pedley said. "I'm going to have it copyrighted. I shouldn't have left you here alone with her. I knew she was close to the cracking point."

"No, it wasn't your fault in any way. I should have sensed, when she hung up from that phone call, that she was ready to do something desperate."

"Who called her?"

"When the phone rang, I answered. A man who said he was the manager of the Club Choucoune said he wanted to know where Mrs. Lowee had left the extra check stubs, could he speak to her a minute. I didn't want to do anything to get her in wrong at the place where she worked, so I let her talk."

"Hear her end of the conversation?"

"Yes, but she didn't say much. Just 'Yes' and 'Oh, no' and 'All right.' She was on the line about a minute and a half. As soon as she hung up I guessed from her look that she was either scared silly or else pretty dismally discouraged. So when she said she wanted to make some tea, I thought it was a good idea. And I let her do it."

Ed Shaner sauntered out from the bedroom. "If you ever need a lie detector when you're on safari, coach, just remember the old blue-tip recipe."

Pedley moved to where he could see into the bedroom. Mrs. Lowee was sitting up against the pillows; the doctor was taking her pulse. "Mean she's ready to change her story?"

Ed said, "Dame says she has something she wants to get off her chest, coach. I can't see how she could have anything left

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on her chest after what she's given up in the last forty-five minutes, but she claims she has."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PAULINE LOOKED UP DULLY out of bloodshot eyes; her voice was barely audible. "The doctor says I'm not going to die."

The Marshal noticed that her lips were badly swollen. "Why'd you want to, Mrs. Lowee?"

"I couldn't stand it any longer." She took a teaspoonful of medicine the doctor held to her lips. "I thought I couldn't. . . . Being so frightened, getting more scared all the time, knowing Raff would manage to kill me somehow as he killed Vinny Rengist." She coughed feebly.

"Afraid of him because you lied about him and he'd learned you had?" Pedley suggested.

"I lied," she shook her head, weakly, "to protect myself when you put all those questions to me and made me sign that deposition. Now I see there wasn't any use to lying because as long as Raff's free, he'll manage to murder me, sooner or later . . . unless you can lock him up again, for good." She paused for breath. "Coming so close to dying makes me sure I don't want to. So I have to tell you the truth—maybe it'll help you to put Raff where he belongs . . . and let me live in peace for a little while."

The doctor took his stomach pump out to the bathroom.

"I'm listening," Pedley pulled a boudoir chair close to the bed.

Pauline touched her puffy lips, nervously. "I suppose you know part of what I didn't tell in the deposition, since you arrested Mister Tarkk."

"Man who called you on the phone told you that?"

"Yes."

"Who was he? Guy who called?"

"One of the waiters at the Choucoune. I won't get him in trouble by telling you his name. He had a message for me. From Raff. . . ."

"Threat?"

"Yes." She licked her lips the way a sick dog does. "About the jewels. See, when Mister Tarkk came to the club early this

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morning to tell me about Raff's being with Vinny, I knew it already. That's why I knew it would be useless to go up to the hotel with Mister Tarkk and try to break up the honeymoon. Because I was sure something had already broken it up. Raff had been to the club to see me, just after midnight."

"Yair?" Doubt was plain in the Marshal's tone.

"He'd brought me a package. A little metal box wrapped up in a brown paper bag and tied with brown stickum tape."

"Raff tell you what was in it?" Pedley made no attempt to conceal his skepticism.

"He didn't have to. I knew it must be Vinny's jewelry . . . or anyhow stuff she'd taken from her mother when she eloped. Otherwise Raff wouldn't have been so particular about my hiding it in some safe place here in my apartment. He thought the best place would be under the top of the gas stove, beside the burners." She clutched at her stomach, gasping.

It's no good, going on with this! You won't get a word of truth out of her! He felt sorry for her, but pity was an emotion he'd long since learned to bypass. "Weren't you sore at him, coming to see you right after piling up with this other girl?"

"Yes," she panted. "I was . . . sore."

"You just took this sack of glitter and told him you'd hold 'em until he told you what to do with 'em?"

"Yes."

"It didn't occur to you that your apartment would be one of the first places the authorities would search when it became known the jewelry'd been stolen?"

"I didn't know it had been. It wouldn't have been stealing if she'd told him it was all right to take them." Pauline licked her lips again. "But of course when Mister Tarkk told me Raff had taken her to the Wrenton Towers and then when I saw the fire on my way home . . . I knew there must have been more to it than that. Something . . . worse. And I didn't want to get mixed up in anything like that. So I decided I wouldn't keep the box for him, after all."

"What'd you do with it?"

"Took a cab to Grand Central," she muttered. "Put it in one of those lockers where they charge you ten cents to get the key that opens the locker."

"Where's the key?"

"I mailed it to his sister's place in Harlem. Addressed to him." She brought her eyes down to his, defiantly. "If you want to send

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someone around to watch it, the number is one four two eight."

He repeated it. "Just where is that locker?"

"Right there by the waiting room." She was flustered. "I can't tell directions; it was the first empty locker I found."

"On your right hand or your left as you went in the Terminal from the taxi platform?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. You can't expect me to remember everything."

"No." He stood up. "All you're remembering is what this guy who talked to you on the phone told you to say. You're doing your damnedest to have Raff cooked in the electric chair, that's all you're doing."

"If you don't believe me, you can go look in that locker."

"We'll get around to that. I don't doubt the jewel case is there. It wouldn't surprise me if you were the one who put it there and mailed that key to him. Only you should've sent it special delivery if you'd wanted him to get picked up today."

The doctor came in, giving Pedley the humorless professional smile. "She'll probably feel much better now she's relieved her mind by talking to you, sir."

"What you want to watch out for is her trying another trip to the nearest exit, doc. I'd appreciate it if you'd stick around until I can get a trained nurse up here."

He put it up to Shaner to make the arrangements, added:

"Soon's the nurse gets here, you pile Ollie into a cab, send her home. Don't pay any attention to her beef, Ed; she'll want to stay here on the job. No need for it; you camp right here with the nurse until further notice."

"Ah, now, coach. I'm short on shut-eye. I haven't had—"

The Marshal cut him off. "Here . . . have a Benzedrine. Make yourself a pot of coffee. Keep your eyes open. I want Mrs. Lowee alive when I come back for her. Don't ask me when that'll be. Sometime before nine tomorrow morning."

He took five minutes out to soothe Ollie's feelings; she was miserable at her "carelessness" in letting Mrs. Lowee stuff the teapot with matches.

When he went out, there were two solid citizens lounging on the fourth-floor corridor; their lack of interest in him was ostentatious.

"You Cap Stearn's boys?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

"Homicide Detail, yeah," answered one.

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"Why the question, Marshal?" asked the other.

"Pass along a tip from the Bureau, will you? Ask him to put a plant in the Grand Central where he can keep an eye on those Help-Yourself lockers—locker one four two eight, to be precise."

"One four two eight," nodded the first detective. "What's in it for us?"

"Tell Stearns he might find some stuff that disappeared from room eight-twenty-two; he'll know what I mean."

"Sure, we'll tell him." The second plain-clothes man sounded faintly hostile.

Pedley stopped at the switchboard long enough to thank the Negro for locating the doctor, then he drove downtown.

Barney hailed him with relief. "Shaner's been trying to get hold of you—"

"Just left him. 'S all right."

"And this Tarkk tries to slip me a fiver to call a lawyer for him."

"Bet he tips headwaiters more'n that. For a playboy, he's chinchy about throwing money around, isn't he! I'll get him out of your hair."

"One for the Tombs?"

"No. Taking him uptown. He'll be in twelve-twenty-two at the Wrenton Towers. I'm taking Lloyd up to play gin rummy with him."

Tarkk seemed reluctant to make the trip uptown; he viewed Deputy Lloyd Seymour, a hard-bitten, rocky-countenanced veteran of fifteen years in the Bureau, with obvious distaste.

Pedley waited until the three of them were speeding uptown with the buckeye clearing the streets before them. "Getting along toward suppertime at that, Tarkk. Let's stop for a bite at that lunchroom you said you patronized early this morning."

"If I can find it." Tarkk didn't seem too confident he could.

"We'll just keep at it till you do." The Marshal slowed to twenty-five at Broadway and Seventy-eighth. "This side of the street, wasn't it?"

"Yeah . . . I think that's it, up ahead there." Tarkk indicated a white-front café with "Open twenty-four hours" in black letters on the windows.

They went in. Lloyd sat at one end of the counter beside Tarkk. Pedley remained by the cash register at the other end of the counter long enough to ask the counterman a question:

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"See that lad in the sportive getup? One who came in with me?"

"Yuh." The counterman was baffled.

"You on duty here last night, along about one?"

"Nah. Hommeny hours you think a guy—"

"Anyone here who was?"

"Sid there, was." He indicated a roly-poly butterball of a youth with curly carrot hair. "Sid's six to two. Usually he comes on at six, that is. Tonight he's early; he swappin' an hour with Bib. Hey, Sid! 'Mere a sec."

Pedley pointed Tarkk out again. "Remember seeing him early this A.M.?"

"Think so." The butterball scratched his head. "Yep, pretty positive I did. He's the one paid for th' dame's coffee."

"What'd she look like, this dame?"

"Jeeze, how you expect me to remember all th' twitch that comes 'n' outa here! All I remember was he come in first and after a while she comes in, plops on the stool beside him, they begin talkin'."

"Friends, hah?"

"Now am I a Sees-All, Knows-All? All I can tell ya, he picks up her coffee tab an' walks out with her. I remember thinkin' it was a cut-rate pickup, ten cents for a cuppa coffee." Sid sniggered.

Pedley said, "Think you'd recognize the dame if you saw her again?"

"No tellin'." Sid leered. "All brassières begin to look alike after you been on my side of the counter a few years."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LITTLE HUMP was on apple pie à la mode when Pedley asked:

"Who'd you meet here this morning?"

The fork mashed the ice cream down carefully over the crust. "I didn't meet anyone."

"Dame," Pedley said. "You paid for her java."

"You're crazy!" Little Hump messed with the ice cream listlessly.

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"There'll be others beside the carrot-top there who'll have seen you with her." Pedley picked up the check. "Let's go talk to 'em."

"There wasn't any dame!" Tarkk denied, almost tearfully.

"Let's see if any of the Wrenton empoyees can describe her." Pedley shoved him toward Broadway. "You want to get straight, Tarkk. You're for it. Either you take the rap yourself or you help us bring in the dame. No two ways about it. You had the motive and the opportunity; you've been concealing information ever since I began to ask you questions."

Tarkk said, "Let me talk to my lawyer."

They went in the lobby. It was crowded; nobody paid any attention to them until Sam caught sight of Pedley. He hustled over.

"Help you, Marshal?"

"Might, Sam. Get me the duplicate key to twelve-twenty-two."

The bellman scurried off through the throng, returned quickly. "Here you are."

"Good. Now, notify your switchboard operator I'll be in twelve-twenty-two. Ask your manager if I can see him in his office, ten or fifteen minutes. And introduce me to this Mac, elevator man on duty up to midnight."

"Sure thing . . . here he is." The bellman waited until a down car emptied itself at the lobby level. "Mac . . . this is the Fire Marshal," he said impressively. "Wants to ask you something about the guests. Geeve, but good, hey, Mac?"

The operator was an elderly man with a shock of thick white hair that looked like swans' feathers; he wore rimless glasses and a benevolent smile. "I will do whatever I can to assist, Sam." He made a little bow to Pedley. "At your service, sir."

Several guests were waiting to enter the elevator. Pedley motioned to Tarkk to get in. Lloyd followed.

Pedley said, "No more passengers this trip, Mac." He entered, stood so no one else could get on.

Mac closed the door, moved the lever forward.

"Twelve," Pedley said. "Mac, take a good look at this gentleman." He pushed Tarkk to the center of the car. "Seen him before?"

"I think I saw him last evening," Mac said carefully.

"Take him up? Or down?" Pedley watched Little Hump's face; there seemed to be no indication of uneasiness in Tarkk's eyes; he was looking directly at the elevator man.

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Mac took his time. "Both, I should say. Up and down. It's difficult to be positive, but I think both."

"Was he alone or was there someone with him?" Pedley said.

Mac considered, judicially. "Alone, on both occasions, I believe, yes."

The relief in Tarkk's tone was enormous. "Told you so." He held out his hand to Mac. "Thank you for having so accurate a memory."

Mac shook hands. "I hope the truth has helped you, sir."

"It's helped a lot," Pedley said. "Thanks, Mac."

Tarkk stared, astonished.

The Marshal led the way to 1222, used the key. "Afraid we're going to have to let you call that lawyer of yours, Tarkk. You're going to need him; you're in up to your ears, now."

Little Hump cried hotly, "You still think I had a dame up here?"

"Oh, I know you did," Pedley said impatiently. "What I have to be sure of is what she did while she was up here."

Tarkk began to recover his poise; some of the old arrogance came back into his voice. "You've got an *idée fixe*, that this lousy half-breed, with his zoot-suit background and his criminal record, has suddenly reformed, gone straight. I know he hasn't. Vinny's mother knows it. When she talked to Vinny on the phone, she pleaded with Vinny to return all the valuables Estero'd made her take away when she left the house in Scarsdale. And Vinny told her mother she couldn't because she didn't have them any more, her husband had them."

Pedley opened the little window to the air shaft in the bathroom; the row of burned matches was still there on the sill. "That's one of those things that nobody can deny, Tarkk. Mrs. Estero won't contradict you."

"If she was alive, she'd verify it," Little Hump retorted. "She'd probably verify the fact that when that crummy Mexican came back from wherever he'd gone to cache the Rengist jewels, she accused him of marrying her just to get hold of 'em. If that heel had run true to form, he'd have clouted her. Maybe he didn't mean to kill her, but when he found he had, his first instinct would have been to set his room on fire to burn up her body. Then, natch, he'd have staged that fake hero act to make it look as if he'd tried to save her and had nearly lost his own life in the attempt."

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The Marshal grunted. "I can see why you want to ring your lawyer in on this, if you're going to try to dream up that kind of a line. Come in here."

Little Hump obeyed.

"See those matches?" Pedley was stern. "Those were used by somebody who was trying to light strips of toilet tissue, toss the burning pieces down this air shaft to start the fire. Now I'll ask my deputy—he hasn't been in here before and doesn't know a thing about it—what those matches mean to him."

Lloyd looked. "A dame," he marveled. "Absolutely. Never saw a slew of burned matches on an arson job where there wasn't a female firebug. Don't know why it takes so many tries for 'em to touch off a blaze, but it always does."

Pedley put the flat of his hand against Little Hump's chest, pushed him against the tiled wall, hard. "Question is, were you up here with her or did you give her the key and let her come up here by herself."

Tarkk swallowed a couple of times. "I didn't give my key to anyone. There wasn't anyone up here with me. You want me to take a lie-detector test on that, I'll take it soon's you like."

"And you're the joker who called Raff Estero a heel!" Pedley stalked out to the bedroom.

Lloyd followed him out. "Think our prisoner might want out the window?" he asked, in an anxious undertone.

"Hell, no," Pedley said disgustedly. "He's out to save his skin, not hurt it." He opened the corridor door.

"Do we let him use the phone?"

"Sure. Let him talk to anyone he wants to. This time tomorrow he'll be where he can't talk to anyone but the cell guard in his block." Pedley shut the door from the outside.

Mac was on the car that came up. He recognized the Marshal's irritability. "I trust I did no harm in saying that about the young man, sir."

"Never do any harm, sticking to the facts," Pedley reassured him. "But you did let a dame off here on the twelfth late last night; she did go down to room twelve-twenty-two."

Pedley singled out Sam. "Higgins?"

"In his office, Marshal. There, next the door marked Credit. He's expecting you, sir." Sam kept pace with him. "That young fellow you just took up; he the firebug?"

"If I knew all the answers"—Pedley brushed him off—"I

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wouldn't be here asking questions." He rapped on the manager's door.

"C'min." Jack Higgins was replacing something in the lower drawer of his desk; an empty whisky glass stood on the corner of his blotter. "What you know?" He waved Pedley to a wing chair.

"Not as much as I need to, Higgins. Answer this one. Suppose a dame came into your lobby alone late last night; how would your people know whether she was a guest or not?"

"A single woman doesn't get above the lobby floor after midnight without being watched like a kid at a candy counter. If she didn't go to the desk and ask for her key, one of the bellman would try to cut her off before she got to an elevator and ask her if she wished to be announced on the house phone before going upstairs. If she was legit, she'd be indignant or at least show her key. If she still tried to get in an up car, the operators are instructed to ask, 'What room, please?' before the car leaves the lobby floor."

"Suppose she gives a phony room number?"

"The operator is required to hold the car on the floor where she alights, to watch her to make sure she does go to that room. Then he comes down and reports to me. If she doesn't go to the room she's specified, of course he tells me right away and I go right up and see what's what."

"Then a dame not accompanied by a man would have had a tough time getting up on the twelfth floor last night, around midnight?"

"She couldn't have done it. Stake my job on it, Marshal. If she got upstairs, there must've been a man with her."

The Marshal stood up abruptly. "All I wanted to know," he said. "I'll bring the dame in so your night staff can identify her."

Higgins seemed relieved. "We'll do our best to cooperate with the Fire Department. Care for a short snort, Marshal?"

"Not now," Pedley said. "But you might save a shot for me. Have an idea I might need a pickup later."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE CLOCK in the spire of the big white church boomed out eight times as the red sedan sped past. The Scarsdale countryside was

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a Currier & Ives print with electric lighting, but Pedley was in no mood to appreciate it. The last Benzedrine hadn't provided the usual lift; possibly its effect had been canceled out by the fact that he hadn't been able to reach Ollie at the Bresnahan home in Forest Hills.

He'd called Shaner at the Marville Arms apartment; Shaner had reported sending Ollie homeward in a taxi an hour and a half ago. Ed was sure Ollie was all right; nothing could have happened to her. The fact remained: she hadn't reached home, or if she had, she wasn't able to answer the phone.

You ought to be hitting the high spots out to Forest Hills; this trip could wait until you're sure Ollie's safe. But he knew it couldn't wait.

The first floor of the Rengist home was dark except for a dim glow behind the front door, but one wing of the second floor was brilliant. Someone up there, he was sure, must have heard his car, yet by the time he'd reached the porch there was no sign anyone inside the house had noticed the sound of the motor.

A huge bow of lavender satin drooped from the silver knocker. He rang the bell. Magda, the skinny, grim-jawed maid, finally opened the door. He pushed her ahead of him into what was evidently a sewing room, with an open door to a passageway leading into the next room. "Mrs. Rengist," he said conversationally, "I have some news about your daughter's funeral."

Magda became as rigid as an epileptic.

Pedley went on, evenly. "It may change your plans, Mrs. Rengist."

Someone in the room beyond sobbed uncontrollably.

He pushed Magda into the passageway, muscled her ahead into an enormous master bedroom furnished with ornate Victorian pieces. On a bench in front of a grotesque five-mirrored dressing table slumped Zelma Rengist with her head pillowed on her arms. She wore a black satin slip; a turbanlike cloth was bound around her head.

Magda scolded: "Why you not hide!"

Mrs. Rengist raised her head, slowly. Looking at her in the mirror, Pedley hardly recognized her.

The flabby looseness of the face had disappeared; the woman looked younger, handsome, in a middle-aged way. She wore no make-up; the dark circles beneath her eyes gave her a rather voluptuous look.

She's sober, that's the difference.

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She straightened up, with an effort. "What is it, about the funeral?"

Too, he was startled at the agreeable softness of her voice. "There'll have to be a police guard, Mrs. Rengist. Your son-in-law will be there."

Zelma Rengist came to her feet, her eyes blazing. "I will not have it!"

"Afraid you won't be able to help it," he said. "We can't stop him; we don't know where Raff is, at the moment. But we know he's promised to be at the cemetery tomorrow . . . and we anticipate some trouble."

"Has he ever meant anything else!" She held her head high; even now some of the regal beauty remained, he had to admit. "I do not recognize him as a son-in-law of mine. Call him a ravisher of young girls, a thief, a convict, call him anything you wish but—"

"A firebug?" Pedley broke in.

"He's been convicted of that," she said, coldly.

"I guess your daughter told you about his record . . . ?"

"Humphrey Tarkk told me. To save Lavinia." She held a hand out to Magda; the servant ran to her. "He would have given his life to save her from that creature, as I would have."

"Tarkk's quite a hand for helping his friends." He brought out the earring. "He went to a lot of trouble trying to find this. Said he'd dropped it somewhere in his room at the Wrenton Towers last night; claimed he'd taken it there to give back to your daughter, who'd lent it to him."

"She had." Mrs. Rengist's eyes widened at the sight of the glittering sapphire.

"Tarkk gave me some cock-and-bull story about having returned the other half of this pair to you when he was out here this morning."

"He did give it back to me." She picked up from the dressing table a small cloth-of-gold evening bag, pulled the draw string, peered inside. "Here it is. . . ." She held it out.

He reached for it but took hold of the handbag, pulled it away from her.

She made a grab to recover it, her face suddenly ashen.

He fished a gold ring from the bottom of the bag, held it up to the light so it shone on the engraving inside the band. "R to L," he read. "As one, now, forever."

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Magda swore at him; Mrs. Rengist sat down quickly on the bench.

"Your daughter's wedding ring," Pedley said. "She had it on when her husband left her alone in room eight-twenty-two at the Wrenton last night. It wasn't on her body when I found her dead, under the bed."

The ticking of an ormolu clock on the wall sounded as loud as if it had been a grandfather's clock for a full half minute while he balanced the ring on his palm.

"Did young Tarkk give you this when he gave you the earring, Mrs. Rengist?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HE HELD OUT the other earring. "Tarkk's father said his son lost this in his room at the Wrenton Towers. I found it in the room your daughter shared with Raff Estero. It was beside her body."

The widow was speechless. Magda crouched on the bench at her side, clutching her around the waist.

"Maybe it'll be easier if I tell you how I think it went, Mrs. Rengist. Correct me if I'm wrong." He put the ring back in the evening bag. "You were ambitious for your daughter; you wanted her to marry into a better set than she'd been brought up in. You hoped she'd marry young Tarkk, but she had other ideas; she fell for this night-club entertainer, who wasn't a bad kid, really, but still wasn't in Tarkk's class socially. So they decided to elope, knowing you'd try to block the marriage; probably out of resentment at your opposition to her wishes, your daughter took along most of the jewels she'd have inherited anyway. I suppose she thought that you'd never let her have them since she'd disobeyed your wishes."

Magda said, "He made her steal them; he was no good, that one."

"No," Pedley said. "Vinny took them herself. I doubt if Estero even knew she was going to run away with them. He was crazy about her. The jewels wouldn't have made any difference. But when you found she'd run away with him, you were upset; you called young Tarkk; he drove up here to see what could be done to break up the honeymoon."

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Zelma murmured, "You don't know what it is: to devote your life to an only child and then lose her to an unprincipled criminal."

"I don't know about his principles." Pedley put the evening bag in his pocket. "Your daughter was satisfied with him. She was in hopes that once they were married, you'd forgive Estero and be friendly with him. That's why she called you up at one in the morning, to tell you she was very happy and hoped you'd let bygones be bygones. What you did was send young Tarkk down to their hotel to see if he couldn't persuade Vinny to come home."

Zelma held her throat as if afraid some sound would issue from it.

He went on. "Little Hump did his best; he checked into the Wrenton, and by chance—I suppose it was by chance, because some of the hotel people would have been sure to remember if he had asked for a room directly above the honeymoon couple—was given a room just four floors above the Starrs . . . the *nom d'hôtel* Raff used when he'd registered."

Pedley continued, "Little Hump called Vinny on the phone. She wouldn't talk to him; I expect Raff was still in the room, then. Anyway, Tarkk phoned you to let you know of his failure and to ask you to come to New York to see if you'd have any better luck. He arranged to meet you at an all-night lunchroom on Broadway at Eightieth Street, and you did drive down and meet him there."

Zelma closed her eyes as if unable to bear the sight of him any longer.

"You didn't want to go right up to your daughter's room because you knew Estero wouldn't let you in to talk to Vinny. You went up to twelve-twenty-two and phoned down. Am I wrong in thinking you asked her to send Raff out on an errand so you might go down and talk to her while he was out?"

Zelma spoke, then: "I have nothing to say. Nothing."

"Then that's how it was. Vinny did send Raff out to get sandwiches. Soon's he'd gone she called you in twelve-twenty-two to say you could come down. You didn't use the elevator, you hurried down the four flights of stairs; you got there before she expected you because I suppose she meant to get more fully dressed before she let you in. She wouldn't have let anyone else in, certainly, wearing no more'n the top half of her pajamas."

The mother began to cry, silently.

"Any rate, you must've tried to tell her how she was ruining

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her life. She probably did her best to convince you she was happy with her husband. At some point you became angry about the jewels; tried to snatch them from her. In the struggle, she clawed off one of your earrings, or maybe it just dropped off, and you grabbed the jewel box. She tried to hang onto it; somehow you lost your grip on it, and it flew back, hit her over the right eye."

"It was," Zelma whispered, "an accident. A tragic accident!"

"I can believe that." Pedley nodded. "I don't think you meant to kill her. As a matter of fact, you didn't. But the force with which she was jerking at that jewel box slammed it back into her forehead and knocked her unconscious. Probably you thought you'd killed her. Otherwise, you wouldn't have left the room in such a panic and run back upstairs. Certainly it wouldn't have occurred to you to make it look as if Estero'd been the one who hurt her. You wouldn't have thought of setting the hotel on fire to point suspicion at a kid who was known to have an arson record. Or did you do that at someone else's suggestion?"

With a great effort, Zelma stood up. "No one else," she said piteously, "had anything to do with it at all. No one." She pushed Magda's restraining arm away. "I don't know how you found out, but I was solely to blame."

"It didn't seem likely your daughter would have let a man into her room, but she might have admitted you," he said. "Then she couldn't have worn the earring; her ears weren't pierced for it. I haven't bothered to check your fingerprints, but we have photographs that'll show you were in eight-twenty-two as well as upstairs in Tarkk's room."

Magda croaked, "She not mean to hurt Vinny."

Zelma said, "Be quiet, Magda. It's all over. I should have known it would end this way." She touched her servant's arm gently. "No one but you will believe me, but you know I would rather have died there in that room than have my darling leave me. You know I loved her better than my own life."

"I know," Magda muttered.

"And only you and I know that nothing that can happen to me can make me feel more remorseful than I already feel." She held out a hand in mute appeal. "Can I telephone my financial adviser before you take me away?"

Pedley said, "Sorry. No phoning. Not now. Later, downtown, perhaps."

Magda glared at him. "I help her get dressed. You leave, now."

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"I stay here," the Marshal answered. "She stays here. Give you just five minutes." He went to the door of the passageway with his back to the two women; a strong night smell of cut flowers came up from the darkened hallway below.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"BARNEY? I'M BACK at the Wrenton. Any news?

"Been calling the Bresnahan number every fifteen minutes the last hour and a quarter, no dice so far. You want me to get one of the Engine Sixty boys to go over there, see what's what?"

"Do that, Barno, yair." Pedley looked at his watch; nine o'clock. "I brought the widow Rengist back here with me."

"How'd you get her to submit to arrest in Scarsdale, boss? We got no more authority out there in Westchester than—"

"She didn't know that," Pedley said. "Didn't know either that the off-the-cuff confession she made wouldn't hold water in court. Which is just as well, because it's fuller of holes than a lawn sprinkler. I've put her up in twelve-twenty-two with Lloyd, so she and young Tarkk can commiserate with each other. Get one of the boys over to Ollie's fast, will you, Barnaby?"

"Sure thing; I'm worried about her, too. Want me to call you back at the Wrenton?"

"No. I'll buzz you. I'm going to round up Estero before some promotion-hungry cop plugs him."

Pedley drove downtown with a thoughtful scowl creasing his leathery forehead. It might be necessary, he knew, to make another trip to Harlem, but the matter of the widow Rengist had to be attended to first.

Halfway between Fifth and University, on Eleventh, he cut the motor in front of a demure, pink-stone dwelling, one of the old, narrow, three-story houses remodeled and refaced to bring them into line with modern *décor*.

The windows were heavily curtained, but a crack of light showed on the second floor. His ring at the front door brought no answer, but when he tried the knob, it turned easily under his hand. He went in.

The small foyer in which he found himself was illuminated by the glow from a log fire in the living-room at his right.

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"Good evening," he called affably. "Anybody home?"

The fire crackled behind its brass screen; there was no other sound.

He went up the carpeted stairs quietly. The light he'd seen from the street came from a green-shaded student lamp beside a long mahogany table piled with books and magazines. The soft radiance shone on the backs of hundreds of volumes in the bookcases lining the walls, on the polished mahogany of a colonial secretary, on the incredible object on the Persian rug beside the table: a luminous thing the size of an ostrich egg, splintering tiny shafts of bluish brilliance against the polished legs of chairs and tables as if possessing an incandescence of its own. The Marco Polo sapphire!

It lay in front of a red-leather barrel-back chair; the scintillations from its hundreds of facets made a speckled pattern on the shiny upholstery. He realized it must have fallen to the floor, rolled to its present position.

He stepped to the door of the dark adjoining room, found the light switch, clicked it. Stretched on his back just inside the door was Clarence Mathing. Across the lower part of his white dress shirt ran a pencil-wide ribbon of dark red that seemed to be pinned to his shirt front by a thumbtack of deeper crimson.

The ribbon widened as he stooped to feel for the man's heart; the blood was still flowing from the wound. Mathing had been shot within the last few minutes.

There was no gun in sight.

A stair creaked, softly.

He went into the hall with a rush.

Raff Estero looked up from halfway down the flight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"YOU DAMNED LUNATIC!" Pedley said. "Come back up here!"

"No." The light glinted bluely on the barrel of the gun in Raff's hand. "You won't make me come back."

"You go out that door, it'll be hotter'n the hinges of hell for you, kid."

"I shot him. I'll take my medicine." Estero went down a few steps.

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"You'll make Terry take it, too, this way. And Tony, Inez."

"If I said I was sorry I did it, I'd be lying. He killed Vinny."

Another step.

"He was the one person alive who could prove you didn't kill er! Come back up here!"

"You'll turn me in!" But he stopped on the fourth step from he bottom.

"Don't know what I'll do. What difference does it make to ou? You said nothing made any difference, now your wife was lead!"

"It doesn't."

"Then give your sisters and your brothers a break. How you hink they'll feel, having people say you were a murderer!"

Raff said, "I'm not. I shot him in self-defense."

"Ho! . . ."

"I did. He came at me with a knife."

"Yair? Didn't see any knife." Pedley turned from the banister, vent back into the study where the great stone sparkled as if here were a light inside it. If he slips out on you now, Ben, hat'll be curtains and nothing you can do about it. If he doesn't rust you enough to come back up here now, all you can do is hone the police.

Raff's voice sounded close behind him. " I wouldn't lie to you, Marshal. He had it open when I shot him. . . . There it is, under is sleeve, see?"

Pedley kept his back to the youth with the gun, went down n one knee to examine the jackknife. The big blade had been pened. On the metal guard that formed a separation between he large and small blades when closed, was a speck of bright ellow; a blond hair would have covered it. But it was the right hade of yellow to match the enamel on the turpentine can at he Marville Arms.

"Say he pulled the knife on you?"

"He did . . . and I was so flustered by seeing that Marco Polo hat I didn't notice what he was doing until it was almost too ate."

Pedley pivoted around, casually. "Who you think'll believe ou fired in self-defense?"

"Nobody," Raff scowled. "Except you, maybe."

"Why should I believe it? You came here to kill him, didn't ou?"

"Hell, no, I didn't, Marshal. No idea of it." Raff wiped his

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streaming forehead with the inside of his sleeve. "I came around to try and get him to have the lettering on Vinny's headstone read 'Lavinia R. Estero' instead of just 'Rengist,' the way I knew her mother'd want it. I thought it'd be safer to come around than telephone, but after he let me in, I changed my mind because he asked me to wait downstairs there while he went upstairs a moment. I thought sure he was double-crossing me by sneaking up to phone the cops, so I came catfooting up behind him. He wasn't at the phone; he was at the bookcase there, pulling out some volumes; he was getting set to hide the Marco Polo behind some books."

"What'd he say?"

"Not a thing. He just went for his knife; he knew the last time I'd seen the Marco Polo was in the room at the Wrenton, and that I wouldn't have to be told what his having it meant."

"What'd you suppose it meant?"

"That J. Humphrey'd given it to him; that he was protecting Junior."

"Tarkk never saw it. Your mother-in-law might have given the sapphire to Mathing, because she was the one who got into your hotel room when you were out after a snack. More likely he found it there himself because he went down there after your girl'd been knocked out—"

"Didn't he kill her?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. The fire killed her, Raff. She'd battled her mother for the jewel box; in the roughhouse the box had banged her forehead. She was knocked unconscious. Mrs. Rengist was half plastered; she thought she'd killed her daughter. She scooted back upstairs to Mathing—"

"He was there? At the Wrenton?" Raff looked down at the body, bitterly.

"Probably he'd been up at Scarsdale with her when Tarkk phoned from the hotel to come help him break up your honeymoon. Or maybe she picked him up here, at his house, before she drove back uptown to keep the appointment with Tarkk; she'd arranged to meet him at a quick lunch on Broadway. Any event, Tarkk had sense enough to know it would look peculiar if he strolled into the Wrenton with a dame old enough to be his mother. So Mathing went with her; since they were about the same age, none of the employees would have thought anything about their coming in together. . . . They might have been a

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couple who'd registered earlier when none of the night crew'd been on duty."

"You knew . . . it was Mister Mathing? . . . You knew it when you saw me up home?"

"He was one possibility," Pedley said. "Simmered down to a process of elimination. Party who tried to blow up the Marville Arms was trying to make it look as if you'd done it. I knew young Tarkk couldn't have, but his father might have. Your ex-gal-pal, Mrs. Lowee, couldn't have done it, because I'd had her watched every minute. But Mathing could have . . . if he'd had any reason to."

Raff pointed at the Marco Polo. "Was that the reason?"

"Doubt it. May have influenced some of his subsequent actions. No, think his intention was to get Mrs. Rengist where he wanted her, hold a sort of blackmail club over her head. She'd shown signs of letting the Rengist fortune be handled by young Tarkk instead of by Mathing's firm. When Mathing suddenly discovered that Mrs. Rengist thought she'd killed her daughter, I expect he made the suggestion that she might escape prosecution and get revenge on you at the same time, by making it look as if you set the hotel fire to cover up a crime."

"My God!" Raff put a hand on his eyes, groaning. "Thought she'd killed Vinny, and she hadn't? Then set the fire that really did it?"

"Don't think so. Not quite sure of all the facts on that, yet. Won't be, until we get Mrs. Rengist to break down and tell what really happened. My idea is, Mathing urged her to start the fire by tossing lighted strips of tissue down the air shaft. When none of them stayed lit long enough to start the rubbish on the shaft going, I believe this fellow went down to your room, using the key Mrs. Rengist had brought upstairs with her, and got the blaze going himself, using some kitchen matches he had with him. But he'd have let Mrs. Rengist think it was her doing."

"So I did kill the right man, after all." Raff drew a deep breath. "All right. I'm ready to pay for it."

"And Terry and the kids? You could pay in sixty seconds at Sing Sing; it would take them a lifetime to pay, three lifetimes."

Raff said wretchedly, "There's nothing I can do about it, now."

"Yair," Pedley nodded. "You can do just exactly as I tell you to. Give me the gun."

Raff handed it over.

"You're to stay here until the police come." Lines etched

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themselves deeply into the Marshal's face. "When they get here, you're to tell them the truth about why you came to see Mathing."

Raff looked at the powder burn on the front of Mathing's dinner shirt.

The Marshal swung the .38. "You're to tell the truth about how you followed him upstairs and how you saw the Marco Polo."

"Well . . ." Raff said, dully.

"You're to tell them you accused him of robbing your wife of the jewels and this sapphire—you did accuse him in your mind, didn't you?"

"Sure—but—"

"You're to say he came at you with the knife," Pedley grew stern, *"that there was a tussle* . . . got that?"

"Yes—only—"

"That there was a tussle and all you can remember is the gun coming up like this . . ." he swung the pistol up sharply . . . "and chopping down like *this!*" He lashed down with the barrel. It caught Estero over the ear. The Mexican went down as if he'd been hit with an ax. He lay still.

Pedley studied the bit of bloody scalp clinging to the pistol's front sight. He wiped the barrel carefully with his handkerchief, put the grip into the dead man's right hand.

Then he went down and used the phone:

"Barney?"

"No news, boss. About Ollie, I mean. Where're you?"

"Still on Estero's tail. Want you to get hold of Ed. Tell him to leave the nurse in charge there, go down to Clarence Mathing's house, he'll have the address. What I want him to do is to bring Mathing up to the Wrenton, room twelve-twenty-two, soon's he can."

"Check," said Barney. "I'll buzz you there, hah?"

"Just hold everything," Pedley said wearily. "I'll call you back."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE DOORMAN at the Metropole greeted him cheerily. "Bet you're glad to be calling it a day, Marshal."

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"What I'd call it you wouldn't repeat to your wife."

The bell captain came bouncing across the lobby. "Long time no sleep, huh, Mister Pedley?"

"Won't need any bedtime stories, tonight." You won't get any rest tonight, either, until you know what's happened to Ollie!

The elevator man gave him a knowing wink. "No room call for Suite BB tomorrow, huh?"

"Yair. Seven o'clock, Joe." Until he was halfway from the elevator to his suite, he wondered why Joe should seem astonished at his reply; then he heard the Moussorgsky on the hi-fi and a load was lifted from his shoulders. Nobody else would be inside; nobody else knew his preference for "A Night on Bald Mountain."

The smell of fresh coffee met him at the door. "Goddamn it, Ollie! I've had a whole engine company hunting for you! Why in hell didn't you let Barney know where you were?"

She arched her eyebrows. "And ruin your reputation?"

He growled, "I've been worried about you. You could've told Ed. . . ."

Ollie poured cream. "Isn't it enough that I scandalized the staff here at your hotel by bringing my bag in with me? Besides, I hadn't decided to come here when I left the Marville Arms. But on the way downtown in the cab, I got to thinking." She held out the steaming cup. "Have they caught Raff Estero yet?"

"They're still hunting him. What were you doing the heavy thinking about?"

"Pauline Lowee. I came to the conclusion I'd been wrong about her."

"In what way?"

"If that man who came to her apartment before the explosion this morning had been Raff, she'd have wanted him to come in. At the time, when she put up such a scrap to keep me from getting to the door, I was sure she was afraid of him. Now I'm convinced that if it had been her ex-Mex, she'd have wanted him in, if only to tell him, in my presence, how she hated him. That's what she'd have done; she'd have felt safe enough to face him with me there. So I'm sure the man outside wasn't Raff; she was lying, and she knew who it was."

He gave her a slow, tired grin. "If Monaghan asks my advice about my successor as Chief of the Bureau, I'll recommend you and mean it. Who do you think it was, a-knocking on her door?"

"J. Humphrey Tarkk, Senior."

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"Reasons for so concluding?"

"After starting the Wrenton Tower fire to cover up his son's attack on poor Vinny, the father decided he ought to enlist a little help in throwing suspicion on Estero. He'd have learned about Pauline from J. Humphrey, Junior, who'd taken pains to look her up." She turned down the volume on the hi-fi. "Am I way off the track, Ben?"

"You're going in the right direction. You might be on the wrong street."

"Suppose he'd gone over to the Marville Arms earlier, right after the Wrenton fire, I mean. Suppose he'd offered her a sizable sum to give you that yarn about Raff's having planned to go back to her after getting all he could out of Vinny. Then if he had come back later, when I was there, either to pay her off or to get her to do something else to implicate Raff . . . she wouldn't have wanted me to see that man."

"No." He finished his coffee. "But she wouldn't have wanted to talk to him on the phone later, if she'd thought he'd tried to blow up the Arms."

"Oh, I'm sure she thinks it was Raff who planted the gas can. And as far as the phone call goes, I think it was this same man who called her to let her know the police had Raff cornered up in Harlem. I think that really got her down; by then she'd had time to realize what she'd done—helped to send the guy she really loved to his death. That's when she decided there wasn't anything more to live for."

"You could be right," he agreed glumly. "Except that I'd give old Tarkk full credit for doing the right thing as he saw it. I can't say as much for the son, but even in his case, I'll give the devil his due; I believe he thought he was doing the right thing all the way, however wrong it may have turned out." Pedley went to the phone. "I'd better call Barney, tell him the lost is found."

"Remember your reputation," she warned.

"Barno? . . . I've located Ollie, she's all right. . . . What?" He put as much surprise into his voice as he could. "No! Is that right! What's the number? I'll buzz him, there." He hung up, began dialing. "Barney says Ed went to Mathing's house down on Eleventh, found Mathing'd nearly killed Raff and then committed suicide."

Ollie came close to him. He put his arm around her.

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"Ed? Barney says you ran into something."

"Coach, we hit the jackpot down here. How do you figure these things out? Here we horse around all day and get nowhere, then you send me down here and—"

"What'd you find?"

"Hoom . . . Raff Estero with a skull fracture, or at least a bad concussion from being brained by a police pistol. Hoom . . . Clarence Mathing dead from a self-inflicted shot from the same thirty-eight. Hoom . . . one hunk of glitter the size of a softball, lying on the rug."

"Where's the kid?"

"Sent him to St. Vincent's, ten minutes ago. Internes say he came to in the amby long enough to tell 'em he'd gone to Mathing's to see the old boy about having 'Estero' chiseled on his wife's tombstone, and while he was there, he saw Mathing trying to hide the Marco Polo in a bookcase. Then Mathing came at him, they had a tussle for the gun, and the next thing Estero knew, the gun clouted him, and blammo, lights out."

"He's lucky if he pulls through," Pedley said.

"Mathing stole that big lunker of a sapphire, all right, coach. There was another piece of proof right there on the rug beside his body. A knife, a jackknife. Know what was on it?"

"Blood?"

"Nah," Ed snorted. "Itty bitty piece of yellow paint, just the color of that turps can we sent to the lab. I guess that winds up this ball of yarn, doesn't it?"

"Sounds as if, Ed. Better call the precinct."

"Have done, yowzah."

"And call Lloyd; tell him to let his prisoners go home tonight but arrange to pick 'em up again in the morning. They'll have to go before the grand jury, anyhow."

"What about La Lowee, coach?"

"Keep the nurse overnight. Mrs. Lowee'll have to appear, too. Check in with Barnus, tell him to tie up the loose ends and ring me at home in an hour or so."

"Check, coach. And then . . . ?"

"Yair, yair. Go pound your ear, Ed. 'Night."

Ollie gazed at him reproachfully. "Mathing. Not Tarkk, Senior. And it was no surprise to you; you can't fool me."

"It was too a surprise," he said. "Here's a well-thought-of citizen, well-fixed, well-liked, who turns torch all of a sudden at sixty or so, just to get hold over a woman whose funds he's been

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investing. Matter of prestige, maybe. Or resentment at losing control over a fortune he'd helped to build up. But I don't believe there's any doubt about it; he put the girl's mother up to bonfiring the Wrenton, and when she couldn't do it right, he did it himself and let her think it was her job of arson. To top it, he got the Lowee girl to feed me a story that might have strapped Raff Estero into the electric chair . . . and then because he was afraid she might renege on it, he did his best to barbecue her alive . . . and make it look as if that had been Estero's job, too."

"And you never suspected it!" Ollie made a face at him.

"I suspected all of 'em, one time or another." He grinned, and some of the weariness had gone out of his face. "But I did think the key to eight-twenty-two was the crux. The boys from Truck Twenty'd had to break the door down to get in. I'd looked for the key when I first went in, right after they'd used the door forcer; it hadn't been there. Next time I came in, Ed had found the key under the bureau. Only person who'd been in there, except Ed, was Mathing. Seemed likely he'd dropped the key there on his second trip to the honeymoon room. Seemed possible his visit had been more on account of planting the key than of recovering the gold mirror and brushes for mamma. But I had to take time to be sure, Ollie."

She touched her fist lightly to the point of his chin. "Even though the Commissioner tried to jump you through the hoops, you had to have proof. There'll be several young Esteros who'll have plenty of time to thank you, Benjamin. The rest of their lives. By the way, aren't you going to ring up the Commissioner?"

"Hell, no. If I called Monaghan now, he'd only insist on my pelting up to his apartment to give him all the details so he can tip off some of his favorite reporters and get himself a good press before that nine o'clock conference tomorrow. No. I can think of something better to do for the next hour or so."

She smiled, too. "I take back what I said this morning. You know more about women than I thought."

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Mike had crossed Frankie the Screw. Now one of Frankie's boys was leading him towards the park—and his stomach grew cold as he waited for the blade . . .

AGAINST THE LIGHTS

by Hassoldt Davis

BLIND MIKE DONNELL STOOD SHAKing in front of Schmidt's Pet Shoppe, his back to the wall, as the siren of a police car wailed through the summer night. He held his hand over the tray of pencils, shoe laces and razor blades to keep them from rattling.

"Mike, lad," said Sergeant O'Brien, "have you heard anyone in there? Burgled, the call said."

"I just got here, Sarge. I was going home. Burgled, was it?"

The cops cautiously entered the shop, and a dozen dogs began barking. Mike didn't wait. Pushing his cane in front of him he fumbled down the north side of Cathedral Parkway. That was close, he thought; damn close. He could hear the sweat from his nose drop with little clicks among the pencils when he stopped at the curb, to wait for someone to help him cross the street.

A hand touched his arm and a deep voice said: "Going across?"

"Yeah." Mike clutched the tray with the money buried in it. The stranger seemed to be in a hurry. Mike felt they must be going against the lights, judging by the sound of traffic, the screech of brakes, the howl of horns forking around them.

"Tough crossing for a guy what's blind," said the stranger. They had stopped in the middle of the street. It seemed to Mike he had somewhere heard that voice before. It sounded like one of the boys, like Frankie the Screw. Nuts, he thought; Frankie was in Kansas, and he himself would be even farther away next week, if the boys didn't get him first. Old Schmidt's dough would start him fresh again. He and Annie could have the farm now, and sell milk and butter and eggs. Even a blind man could milk a cow, or find eggs in a coop. And he didn't need eyes to churn rich sweet butter like his mother used to make.

Suddenly a police siren sliced through the roar of traffic and the car passed so close that he could feel the wind of it.

The stranger's fingers tightened

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on his arm. "These joy-ridin' cops," he said.

Mike felt his stomach go cold. That voice sounded like Frankie's all right. Suppose he'd come back? Suppose the boys had sent him to tail him in case he tried to get away with the dough? Mike began sweating again, thinking how he had planned to double-cross them, remembering the things they used to scare him with when he was cutting up jewelry in the dark back room of Schmidt the Fence's Pet Shoppe. The dogs had been a fine front for the fence, since nobody could enter the place without their setting up a racket.

Carefully Mike had cut the precious stolen stones into smaller stones, and melted down the silver and gold in that black cell where Schmidt had locked him every day, until his eyes had begun to fail him, and finally, when he had splintered an emerald, Schmidt had kicked him into the street.

Then he had gone blind, and had to beg and sell pencils to get enough for him and Annie to eat. And yesterday the boys had promised him a third of the split if he would lead them past the dogs, so they wouldn't bark, and to the hidden safe where Schmidt kept his dough, saving it up to go back to Germany.

Mike had led them. He was used to finding his way in the dark. They had cracked the safe and reached the alley again when they heard the police siren.

"Quick, the dough!" Tony whispered. "Under your tray! Meet you in the Park at 12.30, corner of Eighth and Hundred-and-Tenth."

Now Mike wiped the sweat from his palms under that tray where the money was buried. He flexed the arm the stranger had hold of, and the grip tightened again. If he could slug him on the chin, he thought in panic, if he could knock him cold when he heard no cars coming, there was a chance he could get away. But there wasn't a chance if that was Frankie leading him.

"Look," he said, and his voice squeaked with fear, "we seem to be going against the lights."

"That's okay, Mac," the stranger said. "I'm a philosopher. We all gotta go against 'em sometime. You believe in fate?"

Mike swallowed the sharp lump of terror in his throat. His outstretched cane struck a curb. They were on the side[illegible]k now, heading for the park, for he could smell the trees. A dark vision of the country and the cows and chickens flashed through his mind, then the terror exploded in it.

This guy was leading him right to the spot, to the place where he was to meet the boys and deliver the cash.

He tried to laugh, but it was a

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sickening rattle. "I turn off here. That's Central Park, ain't it?"

"Guess it is." The other still held tight to his arm. "Good place to sit and think over your sins. Good place to die in, under them trees, the birdies singin', the fresh air and all."

Then Mike knew. This was the pay-off. The guy wasn't Frankie, but he was one of the gang. He was the one they'd sent to tail him, and polish him off. Under the trees. His diaphragm flapped up as he anticipated the blade.

Suddenly the siren of the police car blasted again. If the cops would only get him now, he thought, it would be better than what the boys would do. Annie and the cows and chickens would wait till he got out of jail again. The siren went by and diminished in the distance, like a rope being pulled from a drowning man.

Mike's voice was almost a scream as he turned and felt for the hands of the stranger. "Look, take it! You can have the dough for yourself, see? Or take it to the boys and you can have my cut. Honest, I wouldn't of double-crossed you." His fingers fumbled at the tray. "And I wouldn't squeal! No one would believe me anyway. I'll get out of town."

The peace of the country appeared before him, and then the horror of that bit of woods in the corner of Central Park.

"I'll do anything! Listen . . ."

The other man suddenly dropped Mike's arm. "What are you, nuts? To hell with you! So long, and thanks, Screwball, thanks."

"Thanks?" Mike, shaking, faced the terrible scented darkness of the trees. He groped with his cane and raised it to fight off death. "For what?" he chattered.

"I'm blind," said the voice in the dark.

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The little man came into the precinct station looking for Eric Heilkram. They finally found Eric, at the bottom of the bay with his head crushed . . .

THE DEATH OF ERIC HEILKRAM

by Miriam Allen deFord

A SMALL, SPARE MAN, growing bald, walked into the Downtown Precinct station and asked to speak to a detective. About what, he was queried, and he answered that he wasn't sure, but it might be about a suicide. He wound up with the famous Detective Sergeant Phil Scott—the only man on the force with a master's degree in criminology. Scott belonged on the burglary detail, but he was filling in on general duty for a colleague with the flu.

"My name's Gundy," the small man said. "Joe Gundy. I'm an insurance agent – here's my card. Mostly life, and mostly representing two or three big old-line companies.

"A funny thing happened to me last night, and today I decided I'd better come here about it."

He fished in a pocket and drew out a man's wrist-watch and a black leather wallet.

"These belong to a fellow named Eric Heilkram," he explained. "I don't know him well—I sold him a policy three years ago, and I've seen him several times since in the men's bar at the Highcastle. He's a salesman for Vollard and Company, the wholesale liquor dealers, and he does a lot of his work in the evening, when it's easier in some places to see the manager. We've always just passed the time of day, said how are you and hello and goodbye, until last night."

"What happened then?" said Scott. He was busy taking notes. He was always one to let the other fellow do the talking.

"This happened." Gundy indicated the watch and wallet on the table between them. "He was there when I went in, around eight o'clock, standing at the near end of the bar—whether he'd been there on business or just dropped in for a beer I don't know. We said hello, and it's been a nice

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day, and so on, and that was all till he started to leave. Then he turned suddenly and beckoned me to a table in a corner near the door. I went over to see what he wanted, and he pulled his watch off his wrist and his wallet out of his breast-pocket and pushed them at me. 'Here,' he said, 'take these for me, will you? I don't want them with me where I'm going.' And before I could even answer—I just took the things automatically—he kind of waved at me and went out."

"Did he say '*take* these' or '*keep* these'?" Scott wanted to know.

"Yeah, I thought of that afterwards, too. It was 'take' all right. At the moment all I could think of was that he must be going to call on some bar in a tough neighborhood and didn't want to have his watch and money on him, or to leave them in his car, either. It's a good watch, you can see, and later on I went through the wallet, and besides all his papers it's got pretty near $200 in it.

"I took it for granted he'd be coming to my office first thing this morning to get his stuff back, and all I thought at the time was that it was a goofy thing to do—why hadn't he left anything home he didn't want on him, and what would he have done if he hadn't met me or somebody else he could depend on?"

"Well," said the detective, "obviously he *didn't* come after his things this morning. Did you try to check up with him?"

"Of course. I called Vollard first, and they said he hadn't come in. I asked them, and they said he always reported at nine o'clock and got his schedule for the day, and that usually he didn't come in again till the next morning. So then I called his house—he lives out on Belgrade Avenue."

"Is he married?"

"Yes. I know that because when I sold him his policy I went to his place to deliver it and his wife was there. She's the beneficiary, of course."

"What kind of policy is it? Does it have a suicide clause?"

"Yes, but only for the first two years; it wouldn't apply now. It's a straight life policy, $20,000 and double indemnity for accidental death. It's with Interstate Life and Fidelity."

"Did you get his wife on the phone today?"

"I guess I did." Gundy grinned. "I'm talking to a detective, I've got to be sure of my facts." Scott smiled back at him. "Anyway, I asked for him, and she said he wasn't there. I asked if she knew where I could reach him, told her I'd tried the office and drawn a blank, and she sounded kind of flustered. But all she said was that she didn't know, and if I'd leave my name and number she'd have him call me when he came home. My guess is that he hasn't been

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home all night, but she didn't want to say so to a stranger. Maybe she was afraid he was on a binge, or out with some other woman. But it's not likely he'd do either when he'd just handed all his money over to me."

"Was he drunk when you saw him?"

"Sober as a preacher. He was only drinking beer, and not much of that. A guy in his line has to do a lot of polite drinking, and he either learns to go slow and handle it or he stops being a liquor salesman."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Gundy," Scott interrupted him. He spoke in the phone. "Get me Rosenheim in Missing Persons. Rosy? Phil Scott here. Have you any buzz about a" —he glanced at his notes— "an Eric Heilkram? O.K. If anything comes in on him, let me know."

He turned to the insurance agent.

"Its a bit early for that, but I wanted to get it on file. Well, have you done anything else about this?"

"I called Vollard again just before noon, and he hadn't shown. Then I called Mrs. Heilkram back and asked if she'd heard from him. She said no, and this time she sounded pretty upset. I guess if I'd been anybody she knew, she'd have spilled it to me. I thought for a minute of telling her about the wallet and the watch, but then I thought it would only upset her worse, and the sensible thing to do was to come down here about it."

"And very wise of you. One of two things must have happened—unless he's found some way of going out on the tiles without money. Either he did go to some tough neighborhood and either get into trouble or have an accident, without any identification on him, or he's bumped himself off. I gather that's what's on your mind too, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I don't want to sound heartless or anything, but after all the guy's got a life insurance policy I wrote for him, and if there's going to be a claim—especially if there's going to be a claim of accidental death, with that double indemnity clause—I want to know about it."

"What kind of looking fellow is he? I'll have to have the morgue and the hospitals checked for unknowns."

Scott wrote down the description as Gundy gave it. Age 48, five-ten, about 170 pounds, light brown hair, grey eyes, florid complexion.

"He won't be very florid if he's in one of the places we'll be checking on," the detective commented. "Any distinguishing marks?"

"Nothing I remember, except—oh, yeah, he's got a big mole under his right ear. And last night he had on a brown suit and a

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white shirt—I don't remember his tie or socks. And I don't know what kind of car he has—I never saw it. His wife can probably give you a closer description than I can, and tell you about the car."

"This will do to start on. I'll have to see her next, whether we find him right away or not. What kind of woman is she? Is she likely to panic?"

"I only saw her once, and that was three years ago. I don't recall her very well. I've got a kind of impression she was a good deal younger than he was, and rather pretty. But I meet so many people you can't rely on my memory. She sounded rather wrought up when I phoned her the second time, but not as if she wouldn't keep her head in an emergency."

"Well, thanks a lot, Mr. Gundy. I'll let you know when we have any news, good or bad."

"Even if you don't find out anything, phone me, will you? I'm in the book, or my number's on the card I gave you."

"I'll do that. Probably the whole thing will be cleared up by some simple explanation—though I must say this is the first time I ever heard of a man's handing over his valuables like that to a casual acquaintance. I'll get after the morgue and the hospitals and the other police stations right away. Goodbye, Mr. Gundy. Thanks for coming in."

Two hours later the Harbor Police fished out of the bay a man with light brown hair and grey eyes, with a mole under his right ear, five feet ten and weighing 172 pounds, wearing a brown suit and a white shirt. They alerted Phil Scott at once.

Anita Heilkram was a little woman, dark-haired and dark-eyed. She had a nice figure and under different circumstances would have had an attractive face, but when she opened the door to Detective Sergeant Scott her eyes were red and her nose was swollen. The minute he announced himself as from the police she seemed to know what he had come to tell her. She turned very white and shut her eyes for a second, but she said quietly, though her voice trembled: "It's about my husband, isn't it? What's happened?"

When he told her, as gently as he could, she didn't faint or scream. The front door opened straight into the living-room, and she turned and sank into the nearest chair.

"I was always so afraid—" she murmured. "All those places where he has to go at night— I was going to call and report him missing if he didn't come home by dinner time tonight."

"What's the last time you saw him, ma'am?"

"Right after dinner last night. What he always does—what he always did was to check in at the

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office and then make his rounds the rest of the morning. Then usually he'd come home around two or so and make his evening calls after dinner. But he was always home by 10 or 11. If he was going to be tied up after that he'd phone me. When I didn't hear from him last night, and it got to be midnight, and then one and then two, I didn't know what to think. I couldn't sleep all night, worrying. And then this morning a man phoned — the insurance agent who wrote Eric's policy; I forget his name—"

"Gundy. Joseph Gundy. That's how we first heard about it."

"Why, what reason would he have to— He called this morning and asked for Eric, and I just said he wasn't here. I thought he might come in any minute and I didn't want to blab his business to a total stranger. Then this—Gundy, did you say his name was?—called again, around noon, and I told him the same thing. What has he to do with it?"

Scott brought out the wallet and the watch.

"Do you recognize these, Mrs. Heilkram?" he asked.

Then she did begin to cry.

"Oh, they're Eric's — they're Eric's!" she sobbed.

"He met Mr. Gundy by accident last evening and handed them to him—said he didn't want them on him where he was going. When he didn't come for them or call up about them this morning, Gundy started to try to find him. When he couldn't, he came to us."

Mrs. Heilkram blew her nose and visibly pulled herself together.

"I was always so scared," she said in a dead voice. "He had to call on bars all over town—on the Skid Row, and down on the waterfront, and everywhere. Usually he just took some small change with him and left anything valuable at home if he had to make any calls in bad neighborhoods. Last night he must have forgotten, and then when he met this Mr. Gundy he thought of letting him keep the things for him."

The detective thought of Heilkram's phrase—"take these," not "keep these"—but he said nothing. Time enough afterwards to ask her if her husband had shown any suicidal tendency.

"Where — where is he?" Eric Heilkram's widow asked.

"At the morgue, Mrs. Heilkram. And I hate to have to ask you to do this, but I'm afraid you'll have to come down with me now and identify him."

"Oh—must I?" She shrank back in the chair.

"Unless—has he a brother here, or some other close relative?"

"No, nobody. Neither of us has any family living. We have no children, either—just each other,

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for five wonderful years." She began to weep again. "Couldn't—couldn't that insurance man do it instead—identify him?"

"I'll ask him to, but we have to ask you too. There'll have to be an inquest, you know, and the coroner would think it was peculiar if the man's own wife hadn't been the one to identify him."

"I understand. I'm being foolish." She stood up and tried to smile. "Just give me a minute to tidy myself up a bit and I'll go with you." She left the room by another door, and emerged again in a few minutes with a renovated face and wearing a coat. Scott took advantage of her brief absence to locate the phone and dial Gundy's number. The insurance agent answered, and in a low voice Scott told him what had happened and asked if he could come to the morgue and confirm the identification. "In ten minutes," Gundy answered. He was there when Scott arrived with Mrs. Heilkram.

"I saw him, Sergeant," he greeted Scott. "It's him all right, poor devil. Oh, I—" He stopped short as he noticed that the detective was not alone.

"It's Mr. Gundy, isn't it?" said Anita Heilkram. "I remember meeting you once when you came to the house to give Eric his policy."

Her features twisted suddenly and she turned her head away.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Heilkram." Gundy flushed with embarrassment. "I can't tell you how much—if there's anything at all I can do—"

He seemed to realize abruptly that the only thing he could do would be to handle her claim for her husband's insurance, and flushed still more deeply.

"Thank you," she said in a muffled tone. "Where do I go, Sergeant?"

"I'll—just call me as soon as you—I'll take it up right away—" Gundy stammered miserably, and fled. Mrs. Heilkram followed Scott downstairs.

She gave one swift look as he pulled the sheet from the stretcher, nodded faintly, and put her hands to her face. "Yes," she whispered.

The autopsy showed that Eric Heilkram had drowned — there was water in his lungs.

But it also showed that he was unconscious when he fell or was pushed into the bay. He had received a vicious blow on the base of his skull, and it had been given before death, for it had bled freely.

This was not accident, and it was not suicide. It was murder. The case was transferred to the homicide detail. But because Scott had been involved in it first, Lieutenant Grouth had him temporarily detached from the bur-

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glary detail and attached to homicide to work with Sergeant Gus Green, to whom it was assigned.

"Generally the wife's the first suspect," remarked Green as soon as Grouth and Scott had briefed him. "But in this case—"

"Let's get hold right away of Gundy," Scott agreed. "He was the last person we know to have seen Heilkram the night he was killed. I'd better go right around to his office this minute."

"He's had two days to get away in," said Lieutenant Grouth grimly.

"Oh, I don't think we need worry about that. He's a reputable business man—I had him checked. And he did come in here with Heilkram's things and a straight story. What probably happened was that Heilkram was mugged somewhere on the waterfront and that when the holdup man found that he had no cash or valuables he got sore and slugged him. But of course we've got to keep an eye on Gundy."

Gundy's office was on the 16th floor of the Maitland Building. The door was locked and there was no sign saying when he would return. The mail slot was clogged with envelopes. Two days' newspapers and several magazines lay on the floor outside the door.

Scott called at Interstate Life. Gundy hadn't been there for several days, but there was nothing unusual about that; an agent isn't an employee, and Gundy came to their office only when he had business with them. They did have his home address.

It was in a small apartment house on a side street downtown; Gundy had a two-room apartment on the third floor. The manager hadn't seen him for two days, and that was unusual, for one of them had been rent day, and in the four years Gundy had lived there he had never failed to pay his rent on time.

Scott and Green had the place opened and went through it thoroughly. Everything was in order. It was impossible to tell if any clothes were missing, but the razor and toothbrush were in the bathroom. A search showed no papers of any kind, not even personal letters or photographs. The kitchen and bed-sitting-room were neat and tidy, as a finicky bachelor would keep them. A Mrs. Mancini came in twice a week to clean, the manager said.

Mrs. Mancini had been there three days before, she told the detectives, and everything had been just as it always was. "A lovely gentleman to work for," she said. "Everything always in order, not like some of them I have to do with, and my money left for me on the bureau regular, every week. Tomorrow would have been my next day for him. Has something happened to him?"

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Yes, the suitcase in the closet was the only traveling bag she'd ever seen there. No, as far as she could tell there was nothing missing, except his brown suit and shoes, but she hardly ever saw him, so she wouldn't know if that was what he was wearing two days ago.

"Remember what he had on the last time you saw him, Phil?" Gus Green asked.

"That would be at the morgue, when he identified Heilkram. I'm not sure—I think his suit was dark grey, but it could have been dark brown."

They had the office opened and searched it. The files were full of letters about other people's insurance, and copies of their policies—Eric Heilkram's among them—but nothing there or in the desk pertaining to Joseph Gundy himself.

Interstate Life said helpfully that Gundy also acted as agent for two other big insurance companies. Green visited them. Nobody knew much about Gundy personally. Somebody recalled that he had mentioned a cousin named Wilfred Sheldon. Green checked and found that Wilfred Sheldon had been dead for two years. At his address, another apartment house, the manager remembered him, and said he also had been a bachelor, with no close relatives the manager had ever seen or heard about. In desperation Green went to the men's bar of the Highcastle Hotel; the head bartender recalled Gundy readily from the description, but hadn't even known his name. He had always come in there alone, and had never had more than a passing conversation with anyone. The bartender didn't know Heilkram by name, either; they didn't deal with Vollard.

An all-points notice was sent out. Grouth gave the story to the papers, omitting any connection with the Heilkram case. Nobody volunteered as a relative or friend; a few business acquaintances turned up, but none of them had seen him very recently. Apparently Joseph Gundy was a completely solitary man, who had vanished successfully into thin air.

"If he isn't dead too," said Phil Scott gloomily. He went out again to visit Anita Heilkram. He had to explain to her that her husband's body must stay at the morgue until after the inquest, that she herself would have to testify at it, and that the insurance wasn't likely to be paid until the case was cleared up a little.

She had herself under control by now; she was pale and subdued, but steady.

"I saw in the paper about the agent's disappearance — that Mr. Gundy," she said. "But Eric's policy was with the company, not with him. That wouldn't make

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any real difference, would it?"

Scott reassured her. She wasn't concerned about the insurance right now, anyway, she told him. "I've got enough to get by on for the present," she said, "and I've put the house up for sale. I couldn't bear to live here alone. I think after it's all over and the insurance has been paid I'll leave the city altogether—go back to my home town. Everything here reminds me so.

"But oh, I do want to have the funeral over with. Can you imagine, Sergeant Scott, what it means to me not even to be able to pay a last tribute to him? It isn't as if it would be a big funeral, you know—neither Eric nor I have any relatives at all, and we never had much of a social life or knew a lot of people. We just lived for each other—we were all in all to each other." She faltered, then went on bravely. "But I do want to have a service before the cremation; some of the people from his company would come, and some of the neighbors, I'm sure. The casket will have to be closed, I realize that. I can't even see him again myself—now. But it's like living in limbo, with Eric gone and yet waiting like this— You *will* let me know, won't you, as soon as you can, so I can make the arrangements?"

"You can rely on me, Mrs. Heilkram. The inquest is set for next Wednesday, and then we can release the—then you can go ahead with the funeral."

"Thank you—you've been so kind. You know," she said quaintly, "I never had anything to do with the police before, and I had no idea they would be so nice to me."

"Well, thanks. We're not nearly so tough as people fancy, you know—not when we're not dealing with criminals, anyway!"

"Doesn't it seem peculiar," said Mrs. Heilkram meditatively, "that this Mr. Gundy should have disappeared that way right after—right after Eric passed away? It's so queer; I can't understand it. I've been wondering — Sergeant Scott, do you think there could possibly be any connection?"

"I wouldn't think about it, if I were you, ma'am," Scott answered. "Leave it to us. It might be pure coincidence, and if it isn't, we'll get the rights of it when we've found him."

And that, Phil Scott reflected as he drove downtown, is as pretty an evasion as I've ever uttered. It began to look as if they weren't going to find Joe Gundy. Every search for a missing person brings a flood of "sightings." Gundy had been "seen" from Mexico City to Minneapolis, from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon. Every report had to be checked out and every one was disproved—to the inconvenience and annoyance of sun-

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dry innocent small bald men. There had also been the usual quota of messages from mediums and ouija board operators announcing Gundy's whereabouts in the beyond. These, fortunately, could be ignored.

They found Gundy's safe deposit box by checking all the banks, but when it was opened there was nothing in it but some shares of stock and some government bonds. Like the barefoot children of the shoemaker, the insurance agent, having no heirs, apparently carried no life insurance of his own.

The only other thing that happened was the finding of Heilkram's car, parked on the waterfront. It was locked and there was nothing in it to indicate anything wrong, except that there were no fingerprints. When Mrs. Heilkram was consulted, she explained that her husband always wore gloves when driving.

Then Scott got a hunch; and he trusted his hunches. Though there was not a scintilla of evidence as yet, he had a very strong hunch indeed. He communicated it to Gus Green, and Green took it seriously enough to talk to Lieutenant Grouth about it. It might be all hogwash—but it might turn out to be the truth.

Suppose Mrs. Heilkram and Joe Gundy, who said they had met only once, three years ago, until after Heilkram's death, really had known each other a lot better than that? Suppose there was something between them? Suppose Eric Heilkram's death was premeditated murder, with his wife and Gundy as the planners and Gundy as the actual perpetrator or the instigator? Suppose Gundy's disappearance was part of the scheme, and Mrs. Heilkram knew very well where he was hiding? Murder was never outlawed, but if Gundy could not be found and evidence sufficient to indict him could not be discovered, what then? They could not keep Mrs. Heilkram under surveillance forever; sooner or later, if the two played their cards right and were lucky, she would move from the city and turn up, perhaps, in some other country under another name, where Gundy would join her (perhaps he was there already), and they could begin life together on the proceeds of Eric Heilkram's insurance policy. If that blow at the base of the skull had not been too strong, so that the skin was cut and the wound bled, there would have been no way to prove that Heilkram had not tumbled accidentally into the water and drowned; even suicide, failing other evidence, could have been ruled out.

Of course this whole idea might be a brainstorm. Eric Heilkram might very well have died at the hands of a holdup man. Gundy

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might be located soon and have a very simple explanation for his disappearance. Certainly if he was a murderer, he was one of the boldest on record, to have come to the police with the dead man's property.

Meanwhile, there was not a clue as to his whereabouts. He had vanished utterly.

The verdict at the coroner's inquest was death at the hands of a person or persons unknown.

Scott followed his hunch up. If it were right, there was even a possibility that Gundy was hiding in the Heilkram house. Soon two prospective purchasers arrived there, a Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence. Mr. Lawrence was a plainclothesman, Mrs. Lawrence a policewoman. They missed nothing in going through the house from the basement up; Mr. Lawrence said he was an architect and even sounded the walls. All of the late Eric Heilkram's clothes and personal belongings had vanished, as as was natural; and there were no signs whatever that any man ate, slept, washed or dressed on the premises. O.K., that was that.

Mrs. Heilkram was being watched 24 hours a day. She went nowhere except to the market, the hairdresser's, and the dentist's. She received no visitors except the (genuine) prospective buyers sent by the various real estate companies with which her house was listed. She was living the life of a hermit—a young and pretty woman with money enough to live comfortably. A broken-hearted widow trying to readjust herself to life? Or an accomplice in crime—waiting?

This couldn't go on forever. At the end of a month Grouth sent for Scott. "Green can handle the case from now on," he said. "If something comes up he'll consult with you. You'd better go back to your burglars."

Officially, the matter was out of Scott's hands now. But nobody could keep him from thinking about it. It had been his baby from the beginning, and he kept in touch with Green.

The real estate firms had all been alerted. One of them finally reported a sale. Mrs. Heilkram had arranged to sell most of her furniture, storing a few pieces. She was moving out the first of the next month. Interstate was about ready to pay the insurance. There was no way she could be held, nothing to prevent her from going anywhere she pleased, changing her name, remarrying, disappearing as effectively as Joe Gundy had disappeared.

Phil Scott still held stubbornly to the opinion that the Heilkram and Gundy cases were one. He didn't believe Mrs. Heilkram and Gundy were strangers. And he didn't believe in coincidences . . .

Miss Beryl Carson, receptionist and switchboard operator at

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Vollard and Company, came to work very pale and with her hands trembling.

She got through the morning's work somehow, in the back of her mind the terrible fear that she was going crazy. She didn't want to talk to anybody about it and have her fear confirmed. But when her best friend, Pearl Morrison, a stenographer from the sales department, sat down next to her at lunch in the cafeteria and exclaimed solicitously over Beryl's appearance, she couldn't keep it in any longer.

"Pearl," she blurted out, "I'm losing my mind. I saw a ghost!"

"What do you mean, you saw a ghost? When? Where?"

"This morning, on my way to work, in broad daylight."

"Have an extra high time last night, dearie?" Miss Morrison inquired sympathetically.

"Don't, Pearl. I'm scared silly. Do you think maybe I ought to go to one of those head-shrinkers?"

Miss Morrison dropped her facetious air.

"Tell me about it, honey," she said, patting Beryl's arm. "You'll feel better if you get it off your chest."

Miss Carson gulped and plunged in.

"You know that cheesy little hotel on Barr Street, the Desmond?"

"I guess so—one of those places with the lobby upstairs and 'Transient' on the sign, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I pass there every day—it's the short cut from my bus stop here. Well, this morning I was just going by the grocery store that takes up the downstairs, and I happened to look inside, just glancing, you know, and there was a man standing by the counter with his back to me. I don't know why, but something about him looked familiar, and I stopped and stared. And he turned around, just for a second, and then all at once he wasn't there. I don't know if he ran on back, or —or just vanished. Because who do you think it was?"

"Who, for heaven's sake?"

"It was Eric Heilkram."

Pearl gasped and then burst out laughing.

"We both went to Heilkram's funeral a month ago, remember?"

"I know," said Beryl wretchedly. "That's how I know I must be going crazy. It was him."

"Look," Pearl's tone became brisk. "You just made a mistake, and it put you in a tizzy. It was somebody looked a little like him, and it scared you."

"No, it wasn't somebody looked like him. It was him. I saw him twice a day, five days a week, for enough years. It was his ghost. That's why it vanished."

"What would a ghost be doing in a grocery store?" Pearl asked practically.

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"What would it be doing anywhere? There was nobody else in the store—I guess the proprietor was back in the storeroom, getting something. First when I looked in, I thought it was a customer waiting for him."

"Honey, you just made a mistake," her friend said earnestly. "It *was* a customer. You didn't see a ghost, because there aren't any ghosts, and you didn't see Eric Heilkram, because he's dead. Listen, let's do this to put your mind at ease. Meet me after work and we'll go to that store together. I'll describe this man you saw, and maybe the grocer can tell us who he is and where he lives. Then we'll go there and ask for him, and I'll be with you when you see he's just somebody looks like Heilkram and you imagined the rest. Will you do that?"

"I—I guess so," said Beryl dubiously.

The grocer, an Armenian with a heavy accent, had a hard time understanding them. Finally his face cleared. "That man he live in hotel upstairs," he said. "Buy food here sometimes. Name I don't know."

"Was he in here this morning?" Pearl Morrison asked.

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no. All alone here—sometimes I'm in back, somebody come, go away again."

"You see?" Beryl Carson cried wildly.

"Sh!" Pearl warned her. "Come on, we'll try the Desmond."

There was a desk in the tiny lobby upstairs but no desk clerk. A bell stood by the dog-eared register. Pearl pushed the button. After a few minutes a stooped old man with glasses halfway down his red nose peered out from some inner recess.

"No girls," he said firmly. "This is a respectable place."

"Well, the idea! Who do you think you're talking to?" Pearl protested indignantly. "My friend and I wouldn't live in this dump if you gave it to us. We're trying to locate somebody we heard was staying here."

"What's his name?"

"Smith. John Smith."

The old man grinned.

"I'll tell you what he looks like—"

"Oh, come *on*, Pearl!" Beryl pleaded. "I'll go without you if you don't!"

They clattered down the stairs and slammed the door behind them.

"Of all the insulting—"

"You see," said Beryl despondently. "We can't find him, because he doesn't exist."

"Oh, for the love of Pete! If we'd pushed a dollar at him that old vulture would have been ready to oblige. I wish I'd thought of it. Maybe I'll go back and—"

"Forget it, Pearl. It was nice of you, but it's no use trying to find

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somebody that isn't there."

"Then *you* forget it, Beryl. There's nothing wrong with your mind. Try to get to bed early a few nights, huh, instead of dancing all hours with that icky boy friend of yours. Try that out and see if you aren't all right, won't you?"

"O.K., I guess so. I feel better already because I talked about it to you."

"Just *don't* talk about it any more—and take a different way from the bus stop tomorrow. Then see how you feel before you go running to some doctor. Promise."

"I promise, Pearl. I guess I *must* have just imagined it, like you said. Here's where I get my bus. Be seeing you."

Pearl had made no promises. She'd got Beryl calmed down, which had been the object, but she kept thinking while she broiled hamburger and washed nylons and watched TV in her one-room apartment. Beryl looked all right when Pearl came to work in the morning; they exchanged smiles without words. At ten o'clock, when Mr. McVicar, Pearl's boss, called her to take dictation, her mind was made up. She left Beryl's name out of it, but she told him the story. Mr. McVicar had been Eric Heilkram's boss too; Phil Scott had interviewed him at the very beginning. He was a careful, shrewd, sober, middle-aged man, and Pearl could trust him.

He heard her out, then nodded.

"I'm glad you came to me with this, Miss Morrison. I don't know what it means—I was at Heilkram's funeral, the same as you were; but I think it's something we ought to give to the police. Would your friend—I guess I know who it is—be willing to talk to them about it?"

"I could persuade her, if she'll once get it out of her mind that she's seen a ghost and is going crazy."

"I've got a note here on the detective sergeant I talked to before. Ah, here it is — Sergeant Scott. I'll give him a ring, and let you know."

In McVicar's office Scott got all the details.

"Now let us do the worrying, Miss Carson," he said soothingly. "I don't understand this at all, but I'm sure of one thing—if you're certain you saw Heilkram, you saw a live man, whoever it was. The first thing I'll do, I'll go to that hotel, and the clerk will talk to *me*. We'll find this man, no matter who he is.

"Only, I saw Heilkram's body after it was fished out of the bay, I saw him when he was identified by his wife and by Gundy, I saw what was sent to the undertaker's."

"See—it was his ghost!" Beryl Carson was trembling again.

"No, just somebody who looks

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a lot like him. I'd rather believe he had a twin brother than that.

"You saw somebody alive—a double of Heilkram's if nothing else. Did you notice—I guess you couldn't in that brief glance—whether he had that big mole under his right ear?"

"Mole?" asked McVicar, bewildered. "Heilkram had no mole I ever saw." The two girls shook their heads.

Sergeant Scott took a deep breath. He felt as if a flash of lightning had just flared in a black landscape.

"Tell me something, Mr. McVicar," he said slowly. "Just to refresh my memory, describe Eric Heilkram to me."

"Why," said the sales manager, "he was around 40 years old, a short fellow—about five-six, I'd say—and didn't weigh more than 140. And he was losing his hair fast, but what he had left was dark brown mixed with grey. Kind of light blue eyes."

"That's exactly the way I saw him yesterday," Beryl Carson corroborated.

"The coffin was closed at the funeral." Scott sounded dazed. "And nobody from Vollard saw him after he died. The fingerprints we sent out as Gundy's—"

They all looked at him, puzzled and disturbed.

"Hold everything." He stood up abruptly. "Keep this strictly to yourselves, please, all three of you. I'll let you hear from me."

An hour later Anita Heilkram was under arrest. Eric Heilkram was harder to get, but he was run to earth in another cheap hotel three days later.

And Joseph Gundy, who had vanished, was a pile of ashes in an urn at the Columbarium, with another man's name on it.

"It's the damnedest thing I ever heard of," Lieutenant Grouth said. Sergeant Green nodded in agreement. "It was Phil broke it," he said loyally.

"It was Eric Heilkram himself who broke it," Sergeant Scott countered, "by being careless enough to let himself be seen by that girl when he sneaked into the grocery for supplies."

"Do you think they planned the whole thing out ahead, or just played it by ear?" Green asked.

"I don't know—that will come out at the trial. But it was an ideal set-up. Here were the Heilkrams themselves, people with no relatives and few friends. Here was Joe Gundy, a man even more solitary than themselves—no wife, no kin, only superficial acquaintances, no one to notice or care about him. And here was an easy $20,000—maybe $40,000 if they could put it over as accident.

"Heilkram comes here as Gundy and hands me his own watch and wallet with his prepared story. He must have taken Gundy's office key off him—he was in the office

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the first time I phoned him. At the same time he must have rifled the office of any private papers that referred to Gundy's appearance. He describes Gundy as Heilkram. He knows Gundy's body may be fished from the bay any time. He and his wife identify the body as Eric Heilkram's. Then when we try to find Gundy he's disappeared—naturally: he's dead and is being autopsied as Heilkram.

"All they have to do is keep Eric in hiding till Anita sells the house and collects the insurance money, and till the hunt for Gundy dies down. Then they'd be off, to heaven knows where, and the thing would be an unsolved mystery forever. It took imagination and nerve—not only Heilkram's coming here in the first place, but think of the risk they took of some unforeseen acquaintance turning up while Gundy was in the morgue and saying, 'Why, that's not Eric!' I almost admire them for it. They both had to be wonderful actors.

"If Heilkram hadn't made that one mistake, and if a dizzy switchboard operator hadn't decided she'd seen a ghost, the Heilkrams would have got away with the perfect murder."

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The nearly forgotten woman of the lovely legs and curvaceous body had made an unwelcome reappearance. Grafton looked from the glossy photo to the ferret-faced salesman and made his decision . . .

THE ONLY THING TO DO

by Henry Slesar

"WHO?" HARRY GRAFTON SAID, looking at the blank face of the intercom on his desk, an expression of martyrdom wasted on the secretary who couldn't see him.

"A Mr. Flench, from Shawnee Photography Studios. He says it's very important, Mr. Grafton."

The president of the Grafton Novelty Company sighed in reply, rubbed a puffy white hand over his pink and silver scalp, and thought again how little people knew of the sufferings of the businessman: the surliness of labor, the inequities of taxes, and worst of all, the demands upon his time. He said:

"Tell Mr. Flench I'm busy; tell him to come back next week."

"He insists on seeing you, Mr. Grafton. Says he came all the way from New York City to see you."

The president groaned. "All right. Send him in."

The man who closed the oak-panelled door behind him was thin and ferret-faced, with oiled black hair and the lighted eyes of the dedicated salesman. He carried a brown envelope in his left hand, and jabbed the right forward like a sword thrust. Grafton took it in self-defense.

"Mr. Grafton? Good of you to see me. Flench is the name, Shawnee Studios, New York. Perhaps you've heard of us."

"No," the older man said. "I don't get to New York much."

"Last month?" An eyebrow lifted.

"Yes, last month I was there. For the convention. But I don't remember—"

"Oh, I don't believe we had the pleasure of meeting." Flench flashed a vulpine grin. "Not face to face. But perhaps we have some mutual friends."

"Oh?"

Grafton blinked slowly, and watched the man unwind the bit of string around the envelope.

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"Mr. Grafton, I know you're a busy man so I won't waste your time. Our organization specializes in convention photographs. We number among our clientele some of the most distinguished names in American business. It would be a great pleasure for me to add your name to that roster."

"Photographs? I'm sorry, Mr. Flench. I'm not much for pictures. Not photogenic." He forced a small chuckle.

"I wouldn't be so sure. I'm rather pleased, for example, with this interesting candid study we made of you last month. It's the sort of portrait that can never be attained with a formal sitting. Don't you agree?"

He handed a glossy print over the deck and sat back, awaiting approbation. Grafton looked at it, and his jowls quivered. The world moved beneath the swivel chair.

"Unusual, no?" Flench said earnestly. "Our studio was very impressed with the results. I hope you are, too."

Grafton was impressed. He stared open-mouthed at the startling image of himself, half-naked, bare-legged, rumpled undershirt over protruding paunch, highball glass in his hand, a nightmare in a strange bedroom. And, most terrifying, most shattering, the nearly-forgotten face, the red raw laughing mouth and tumbled yellow hair, the long legs and curving body of *her*, the woman without a remembered name, the woman who had said "baby-face" and "sugar" and who had murmured when he touched her and giggled at his middle-aged ardor.

"Of course," Flench said, "we don't offer our patrons a single choice. I'm happy to say that we have twelve assorted photos, each with its own special charm." He extracted the remaining contents of the envelope. "We're sure you'll want to own the rest of these as well, Mr. Grafton."

The businessman didn't touch the glossy prints as Flench fanned them across his desk blotter. His eyes swept over this gallery of horrors and the heartbeats exploded inside his chest. He tried to say something, but his tongue had gone hard and dry and immobile.

"As to price," Flench said cheerfully, "we consider this a sort of introductory offer, and can make you a very attractive deal. The photos are three hundred dollars apiece, but the complete set is only three thousand dollars. That's a saving of fifty dollars each. As a businessman, that should appeal to you, Mr. Grafton."

The president wasn't answering.

"I don't mean to rush you, Mr. Grafton. But I have to be back in the city before three. You understand."

The older man pulled his eyes from the shocking scenes. "You

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know her," he said hoarsely. "You know this woman. You were in the apartment all the time."

"If you don't mind, Mr. Grafton." The voice was slightly hardened. "I'm really in a considerable hurry, and I'd like to come to terms as quickly as possible. As a matter of fact, our sales department believes they have another customer for these photos right here in town. If you're not interested, I should see that prospect this morning."

"What prospect?"

Flench laughed. "Really, Mr. Grafton. If you had my particular merchandising problem, I'm sure you'd recognize the same market potential. I was thinking of your wife, of course."

"My wife?"

"You're not surprised?"

"No." Grafton shook his head, and pushed his way up from the swivel chair. "No, of course not."

"Then suppose we finalize things right now. Our company prefers cash to checks, Mr. Grafton."

"No, Mr. Flench."

"Pardon?"

"I said no." The president leaned against the desk with both hands. "No money. No cash, no checks. Nothing."

The lighted eyes changed, flickered, and then grew brighter than ever.

"If that's your decision—"

"Yes. But not my only one."

"What?"

"Do you know what you've done, Mr. Flench? Do you know what you're forcing me to do?"

"I don't understand."

Grafton shut his eyes.

"You've ended my life this morning, Mr. Flench. You've killed me."

"Now, really—"

"I'm serious. You've walked in here and killed me. I'm a dead man, and it's your responsibility."

The grin reappeared. "I think we're being a little melodramatic, Mr. Grafton."

"You think so? Then let me tell you something. I went to that convention in New York for a reason, Mr. Flench. I went to contact some old friends of mine in the business, friends I hoped to get orders from. I needed those orders. Without them, I couldn't keep my head above water for another six months. That's how bad business is."

Flench clucked sympathetically.

"But I didn't succeed. I didn't get a single word of assurance that I could save my business. That's why I got so drunk, and ended up with that woman. That's why I'm in the trouble I am now. But that's not the important thing. The important thing is that I know you won't be satisfied with the money I can give you now. I know that in a few weeks, a month—you'll be back."

"I wouldn't worry about that

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matter right now, Mr. Grafton."

"But it's true, isn't it? This is only the beginning. You'll sell me these pictures, and then you'll be back with more prints. You'll want more money, and still more, until I won't have a dime. You'll drain me of everything—"

Flench frowned. "I'm really in a hurry, Mr. Grafton."

"And what alternative do I have? If I can't give you the money, you'll go to my wife. We've been married twenty-eight years. I love her better than my life. We have two grown children. Their respect and affection for me is the most important thing I own. If these pictures were shown—" He swayed unsteadily.

"We understand each other then," Flench said. "It's not really a matter of choice."

"But it is. One choice only. You've left me no other."

The president's puffy hand slid open a drawer in his desk, fumbled inside, and emerged with a revolver.

Flench stared.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"The only thing I *can* do. Even you can see that, Mr. Flench. The gun is only a technical detail. I was dead the minute you opened that envelope."

The man from New York stood up. "Let's not be foolish about this, Mr. Grafton. Put that thing away, and let's talk this over like sensible business people."

"There's nothing more to talk about."

Flench's tongue flicked at his lips. "What are you going to do?"

"What else can I do? I'm going to kill myself. But first I'm going to make sure that you can't hurt anybody else the way you hurt me. I'm going to kill you first."

"You're crazy!" The lighted eyes flew to the door and the windows.

"I'm sane, Mr. Flench. This is the only sane course left."

The safety clicked . . .

"You misunderstood me," Flench said, the suavity gone from his voice. "I had no intention of coming back. All I wanted was the three thousand—I was going to destroy the negatives—"

"You think I'll believe that? I know your type, Mr. Flench. You'll never let me alone until I'm a corpse. Well, that won't be long now."

He raised his arm, and pointed the muzzle at the younger man's brow.

"No, wait!" Flench backed up and thudded into the chair behind him. "Please wait, Mr. Grafton! I swear to you that I didn't mean it! I swear to you!"

"It's too late, Mr. Flench."

"Look, look!" he shouted, digging into his breast pocket. "The negatives! I have the negatives! You can buy these, too, Mr. Grafton. All of them!"

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"I'm not buying anything, Mr. Flench."

"You can have them!" Flench screamed, flinging the negatives on the desk. "You can have everything! Only don't kill me, for God's sake! Don't kill me!"

Slowly, Grafton lowered the revolver.

"All right," he said sadly. "All right."

He picked up the negatives, counting them, letting them slide from his fingers onto the floor.

"Now get out of here," Grafton said. "Get out now."

Flench waited for no further instruction. He wheeled and ran to the door, slamming it shut behind him.

Grafton looked after him, gazing blankly at the oak panels. Then he lifted the revolver again, and pulled the trigger dreamily. From the barrel, a cloth flag dropped out that read "BANG!"

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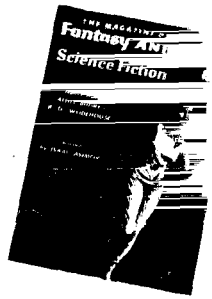

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